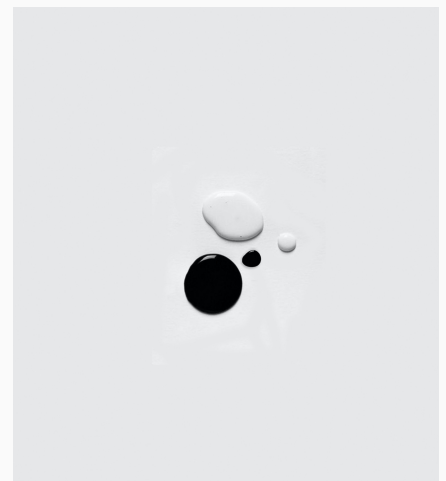


DEPARTMENT OF  
PHILOSOPHY, LSR

# Noesis

Volume VIII. (2021-22)



"The shame of being  
a man - is there any  
better reason to  
write?"

*Do we have to leave the first  
page blank for this volume too?*

# CONTENTS

4  
Foreword  
Dr. Lipi Saxena  
Dr. Sonam Singh

5  
Editors' Note

147  
Meet the Editorial  
Board!

6  
**Unravelling the Parameters for  
Dispensing Justice in the Criminal  
Justice System: Revisiting the  
Philosophy Behind Punishment**  
Fathima Afrin

19  
**Art and Death: An Examination of Artist  
Suicides and Destructive Tendencies in  
the Light of Death as a Construct**  
Adhishri Aruman

27  
**Gender & Sexuality in Theravada  
Buddhism**  
Sulekha Kumari Das, Tracey James and  
Vani Agnihotri

41  
**Rethinking Nepotism: Do Private  
Obligations take precedence over  
Public ones?**  
Arushi Garg

49  
**Utilitarianism and its Relevance in  
Contemporary War Ethics**  
Vrinda Goswami

59  
**Cosmetic Panopticon and the "War  
Against Obesity": Situating Gendered  
Fatness in Biopolitics**  
Nanda H.

72  
**Fan Culture- the Sigil of Literature and  
Modern Society**  
Shreya Juyal and Vanshika Yadav

81

**Reflections of Reality: Fleabag, Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Breaking the Fourth Wall in Cinematic Art**

Mannat Ahmed Khan

92

**Utopia- A Goal?**

Vaishnavi Nimma

102

**Exploring the Relationship between Philosophy and Policymaking**

Ananya Nivsarkar

110

**Culture, Gender and The Climate Crisis**

Darshana Singh

123

**"What Doesn't Kill Me, Makes Me Stronger"**

Aadrika Sominder

135

**Furnishing the Ivory Tower: On Dark Academic and the 'Aesthetic' of the Scholarly**

Yusra Zainuddin



# Foreword

We are immensely delighted to introduce the latest publication of the student academic journal of the Department of Philosophy at Lady Shri Ram College for Women: *Noesis* Vol. VIII.

Every year we are amazed by the diversity and depth of the submissions we receive, and this year was no different. This edition witnessed students writing about the most unique intersections of Philosophy with remarkable competence and skill. *Noesis* Vol. VIII explores themes like gender, sexuality, aesthetics, contemporary entertainment, policy, human relationships, climate all through an exclusive philosophical lens. We hope that these papers are able to trigger necessary conversations that prove to be valuable in taking further the discourse these papers aim to explore.

We are really grateful that we are able to provide a space like *Noesis* for students to explore and experiment with an otherwise privileged and somewhat inaccessible subject like Philosophy. Spaces like these encourage students to indulge in critical thinking and utilise opportunities to realise their own potential. With every edition, we aim to make *Noesis* more accessible and with that the project of philosophy as well.

We would like to thank our colleagues in the Department for their support and the Principal, Dr. Suman Sharma, for always guiding us. We deeply appreciate the commendable efforts of all students who have contributed to this edition and because of whom we are able to publish an exceptional selection of papers for yet another year.

Sincerely,

***Dr. Lipi Saxena***

***Dr. Sonam Singh***

***Department of Philosophy***

***Lady Shri Ram College***

***Delhi University***

# Editors' Note

## ***The shame of being a man - is there any better reason to write?***

This academic year has been a period of profound turbulence. From moving forward in our odd semester with online lectures (and arguably finding comfort in them) to being *thrown* back into offline reality, it is safe to say that our minds are all a little *scrambled*. We have come back to reality with uprooted foundations fundamentally altered by a period of isolation that no social animal is expected to endure without any changes in the way they think. Yet, amidst this turbulence, we managed to forge new bonds, discard the old and embrace the (often non-linear) process of *becoming*.

In this delicate period where people are undergoing significant life changes, we understand that all forms of art, including academic literature, has the impact that a parent's hand has on the shape of a newborn's skull. Our journal aims to introduce and encourage diverse views of thinking that dwell least on the dogmatic side of the spectrum. When Deleuze talks about the shame of being a man, man is representative of all dominant forces that influence us today. This issue of *Noesis* aims to break free of these forces through our writing, with a keen eye towards social, political and moral structures, gender and contemporary aesthetics.

Is there indeed any better reason to write than to un-man philosophy?

***Noesis Editorial Board, 2021-22***

# UNRAVELLING THE PARAMETERS FOR DISPENSING JUSTICE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: REVISITING THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND PUNISHMENT

*Fathima Afrin*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to explore the rationale behind punishment and the objectives it serves. The practise of punishment is endorsed by most philosophers and thinkers. Aristotle opined that punishment is a “negative reward” to the offender for their misdeeds. According to Hegel, “Punishment is the demand of criminal as his reward.”*

*By citing various theories of punishment and its grounds listed by several legal and political philosophers, the paper attempts to encourage the populace to rethink present ideas of punishment and to focus on the readjustment and reformation of the prisoner.*

**Keywords:** *Punishment, Jurisprudence, Criminal Justice, Utilitarianism, Retribution, Incapacitation, Deterrence, Rehabilitation, Restoration, Justice Dispensation, Death Sentence.*

## I. Introduction

Punishment is defined as the deliberate infliction of pain or suffering on an actual or supposed offender for an offence such as moral or legal transgression<sup>1</sup>. The question of how punishment can be justified has long been a question pondered over by moral, legal and political philosophers- how could the intentionally burdensome treatment of an individual, by the state apparatus, be justified? What is defined as proper punishment? What are the standards to be kept in mind to gauge its propriety? Is the criminal or the society at the receiving end of it? Why do people get punished at all?

This deliberate infliction of pain serves various social-control functions. The idea is to inflict pain on the criminal, similar to what the perpetrator of the crime inflicts on their victim. A discussion on this shall inevitably lead back to the evolutionary process of punishment of primitive men for whom punishment was an instinctive process rather than a rational one. These are the questions that are at the threshold of our discussion.

## II. Conducting a philosophical inquiry into the rationale for punishment

Philosophy helps us understand the underlying principle of law and serves as a way to learn its evolution from a mere proposal to a codified law. While analysing the implications of punishment, philosophy provides us with an idea about the effectiveness of punishment and the reforms that are to be bought in on the prevailing system of punishment. Philosophy has to intervene and provide the tools for evaluative criticism, answer questions of justice, and help ascertain where the line between theories of punishment and justice delivery, has to be drawn.

Jurisprudence, the science or the philosophy of law covers almost exclusively the analysis of the formal structure of law and its concepts. The modern mindset towards jurisprudence is well outlined by Julius Stone who described jurisprudence as:

*“The lawyer’s extraversion. It is the lawyer’s examination of the precepts, ideals, and techniques of the law in the light derived from present knowledge, in disciplines other than the law”*

There is a widespread acceptance among the populace that those who wilfully defy the law deserve to be punished. However, why punishment is necessary is a bone of contention among many. Some argue that punishment is necessary in order to reform

---

<sup>1</sup> Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy



the offender, while others argue that punishment is necessary in order to prevent potential law-breaking. But, conclusively, the question of whether to punish or not to punish a convict shall depend on the philosophy you conform to.

William Page in one of his lectures on Pragmatism elucidates how each of us have an underlying philosophy of life, even those of us to whom the names and notions of philosophy are unknown or anathema. There is, in each of us, a stream of tendency, whether you choose to call it philosophy or not, which gives coherence to thought and action (Butler, 43). Penology, the philosophy of dealing with convicted criminals, houses various questions and theories on what the point of punishing a person is, which may prove useful in this debate.

The most important function of the state is that which it discharges as the guardian of order; preventing and punishing all injuries to itself, and all disobedience to the rules which it has laid down for the common welfare (*Holland 378*). The State usually proceeds by an enumeration of the acts which infringes upon them, coupled with an intimation of the penalty to which anyone committing such acts will be liable. The branch of law which contains the rules upon this subject is described as 'Criminal Law', 'Droit Penal' or 'Straferecht' (*ibid, 378*).

The philosophical basis of punishment will affect the existing standards of liability laid down by the law. If punishment is based on an ethical desire to make men better, a subjective theory of liability should be adopted. If punishment is designed to protect people from certain acts, then punishment may be inflicted even if there is no moral guilt.

### **III. The Purpose of Criminal Justice**

Punishment can be examined from two different aspects. One, we can regard it as a method of protecting society by reducing the occurrence of criminal behaviour, or else we can consider it an end in itself. Punishment can protect society by cautioning potential offenders, by preventing the actual offender from committing further offences and by reforming them and turning them into law-abiding citizens. The issue of punishment consists largely of the competing claims of five different approaches.

#### **1. Retribution**

- a. According to most retributive theorists; in accordance with the demands of justice, wrongdoers are thought to deserve to suffer, so punishment is justified

on the grounds that it gives wrongdoers what they deserve. The Judeo-Christian tradition in the Mosaic Laws of the Old Testament that emphasised the idea of 'an eye for an eye' can be credited to the evolution of the equation of punishment with the gravity of the offence. Even verses in the Quran stipulate the retribution of "life for life, eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (*Quran*, 5:45) which correspond with Biblical Verses (*Exodus*, 21:23-25). The principle of 'let the punishment fit the crime' formed the basis for criminal sentencing in much of Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, this principle of punishment was altered to recognise that some offenders may be less blameworthy due to factors outside of their control (incapacity, mental deformity, immaturity etc.) The retributive theory hence rests on the idea that the punishment must be in accordance with the gravity of the offence and less about the characteristic of the offender.

- b. These retributive sanctions based less on the culpability of the offender and more on the nature of the offence committed has been criticised on several grounds as being overly rigid and unyielding. The principle of Lex Talionis (i.e, the eye for an eye dictum) has limited applicability and cannot be sanctioned in acts of drunkenness, traffic violations, prostitution etc. Post-Socratic philosophers frown at retributive theory as unwise and ineffective for the simple logic that "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Despite all its criticisms and the very complexity and inconsistency with regards to its application, the retributive theory and its principle of "an eye for an eye" remains a common justification in some Western cultures.

## 2. Incapacitation

- c. The utilitarian theory stresses that the punishment should be forward-looking and for that one should be punished "in order to" and not "because of" (*Hosper*). He also added that this theory is applied to serve some purposes and not because of the wrong that is believed to be committed. Today the standard legal approach is utilitarian, for it is impossible for the law to attempt to carry out all the dictates of religion and morality, since they can only enforce a minimum standard of conduct fulfilling basic criteria. Punishment must be directed, both to deter others from breaking the law and to readjust the attitude of the offender in accordance with the demands of social life. But even a utilitarian approach does not mean that we can ignore the inner springs of human conduct, for punishment based on a real understanding of the mind of

the particular criminal is more likely to be effective than that which metes out the same punishment for the same acts irrespective of the individual's character<sup>2</sup>.

- d. Incapacitation is a primary utilitarian concept aimed at decreasing the physical capacity of the person to commit criminal acts through various physical restraints on their actions.
- e. Several devices, methods and techniques have been used as a means to carry out incapacitation. It entails physically removing the criminal from society which they are may potentially endanger. The early practises of banishment into the woods or the English system of transportation of offenders to other colonies in the eighteenth century, and political exile in modern times are examples of incapacitation, thereby removing their physical opportunity for misconduct in the original setting. In British history, incapacitation often occurred on Hulks. Hulks were huge ships that carried convicts to faraway lands to not allow them to be able to commit crimes in their community any longer. Other types of incapacitating devices are as diverse as electronic shackles for monitoring offenders in open spaces, Breathalysers that prevent drunk drivers from driving, "kiddie harnesses" to control the movement of children in public places, and chastity belts for limiting sexual promiscuity<sup>3</sup>. The usage of physical structures for incarceration served other purposes than just physical restraint of the body. These places of confinement are described in context-specific terms like towers, dungeons, workhouses, gulags, jails, prisons, labour camps, "readjustment" centres, correctional or treatment facilities, cottages, sanatoriums, and mental institutions. The language used is also meant to signify the several functions that it serves beyond physical incapacitation.

### 3. Deterrence

- a. Deterrence is the theory that the threat of punishment will deter people from committing any offence and reduce the probability of offending in society. The underlying principle of the theory of deterrence is that it is utilitarian and forward-looking. It aims to reform future behaviour rather than simply provide punishment for current or past behaviour.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bhusan, Anand. *The Expiatory Theory of Punishment*, Indian Legal Solution, 2019, <https://indianlegalsolution.com/the-expiatory-theory-of-punishment/>

<sup>3</sup> D.Miethe, Terance and Lu, Hong. *Punishment: A Comparative Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, ISBN: 9780521844079

- b. This theory has two applications: the first is that the punishment imposed will deter or prevent offenders from committing any further crimes and the second is that the public knowledge will have a generalised deterrent effect that prevents others from committing crimes. Jeremy Bentham, the eccentric founder of the concept of Utilitarianism, took a consequentialist approach to punishment. He characterised punishments as always evil but nevertheless hoped that use of them could deter crime by others, thereby increasing the overall happiness in society and decreasing the number of criminals. Cesare Baccaria, a jurist from Milan during the Enlightenment, argued that crimes strained the 'social contract' and punishments should be used to ensure that people continued to believe in society's efficacy. This would lead to a deterrence scheme where neither those who are punished, nor those who are aware of the punishment, would desire to commit such crimes in the future.
  
- c. Among lawyers, the deterrent theory was, until recently, the most accepted, and much scorn was sometimes poured on the 'sentimental' or 'weak' approach of those who advocated reform in the criminal justice system. The criminal is a danger both to society and to himself, and the criminologist urges that only the most scientific methods be used to remove this danger (*Medico-Legal Society*). Few modern writers recognize the need to deter others. On the other hand, to regard deterrence as the soul of the criminal law is a confession either of defeatism or cynicism.

#### 4. Rehabilitation

- a. Rehabilitative theories of punishment look at what causes a person to commit the crime and then try to remedy the situation. It is quite often vouched as the most effective form of punishment and has shown promise in achieving its goals. The Norwegian Prison System based on rehabilitation, is quite renowned for its humanity and has one of the lowest reoffending rates in Europe. People may find the Norway prison conditions controversial because the common understanding of prison is as a place of penance and deprivation, and not as a place of domestic comfort. In this prison system, every type of prisoner is accepted so long as they fit the criteria- the main one being a promise to live a crime-free life on release.

- b. The Probation of Offenders Act, 1958 is a social legislation that is meant to reform offenders so as to prevent them from becoming hardened criminals by providing an educative and reformatory treatment to them by the Government. This Act has been created in lieu of increasing emphasis on reformation and rehabilitation of the offenders as useful and self-reliant members of the society, without subjecting them to the deleterious effect of jail life.
- c. The ultimate purpose of rehabilitation is to restore a convicted offender to a constructive place in society through training, education and treatments. It is done through the means of correctional facilities, reformatories, and therapeutic communities which are described as jails, prisons and other institutions of incapacitation.
- d. Unlike retribution which emphasizes uniform punishments for similar offences, rehabilitation focuses on the individual characteristics of the offender that require treatment and intervention. Through its application of current therapeutic techniques of modern behaviour and behavioural modification, rehabilitation has had considerable recidivism rates.

5. Restoration

- a. Restorative justice fundamentally questions established practises in justice dispensation. It refers to a method of justice that “seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime”. The origin of the restorative systems of justice can be traced back to precolonial African societies, early legal systems of Western Europe and ancient Hebrew justice. It literally means restoring or returning back to the previous condition of all parties involved in or affected by the original misconduct. In this philosophy, the offender takes full responsibility for the crime and initiates restitution to the victim.
- b. In this context, the theory of reintegrative shaming developed by John Braithwaite relates to restorative justice. According to the restorative justice theory, societies have comparatively lower crime rates if they communicate the shame associated with crime constructively. Reintegrative shaming communicates disapproval within a continuum of respect for the offender; the

offender is treated as a good person who has committed a bad deed<sup>4</sup>. To put it another way, societies that are compassionate and respectful while also taking crime seriously have low crime rates; societies that humiliate and degrade criminals have a higher crime rate. Countries like Norway and Japan place the highest reliance on reintegrative shaming as a substitute for humiliating or outcasting them. The practice of “written apology” and “letter of forgiveness”, prevalent in the Japanese Criminal Justice System, is designed to express remorse and make restitution.

#### **IV. Modes of Punishment**

A set punishment for any specific crime will not work with equal effectiveness if the reasons for committing a crime by the first offender are unlike the reasons which induce the second offender to commit the crime.

The more savage modes of punishment have gradually been abolished- physical torture is now happily rare. Few modern codes emphasize corporal punishment as a general sanction. Today a growing minority urge that capital punishment should be entirely abolished, although the majority support it as the appropriate penalty for murder and rape. It is now realised that, if public opinion regards the punishment as out of all proportion to the nature of the offence, the law defeats its own object, since even the courts may encourage evasion of the law<sup>5</sup>.

Under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, there are five prescribed forms of punishment. Section 53 of the Indian Penal Code prescribes the following punishments:

1. Death Sentence or Capital Punishment
2. Sentence of Life Imprisonment
3. Sentence for imprisonment for a term either rigorous(with hard labour) or simple
4. Forfeiture of property
5. Fine

That apart, the ordering of the convict under Section 357 of the Code of Criminal Procedure to pay compensation, which includes compensation to the victim, is also a punishment from the angle of the convict.

---

<sup>4</sup> Braithwaite, John. *Reintegrative Shaming*, Australian National University, 2000  
[http://johnbraithwaite.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2000\\_Reintegrative-Shaming.pdf](http://johnbraithwaite.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2000_Reintegrative-Shaming.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>Whitecross Paton, George. *A Textbook of Jurisprudence*, 4th ed, Oxford University Press

The Indian Criminal Justice System functions on the motto of “hundred criminals can escape, but one innocent should not be punished”. Often cited as the Blackstones Formulation in criminal law, it reiterates that criminal law can err in two ways; it can wrongly convict the innocent or wrongly acquit the guilty. Blackstone’s idea is that we should treat these two sorts of errors differently, preferring- the acquittal of the guilty to the punishment of the innocent.

A strenuous function of Courts in India is to make a selection from among different punishments. The function is more strenuous when the selection is between life imprisonment and death considering the heinous nature of the crime. Having regard to the conditions in India, to the variety of social upbringing of its citizens, to the disparity in the level of morality and education in the country, to the vastness of its area, to the diversity of the population and the paramount need to maintain law and order in the country, in evaluating crime and apportioning the most appropriate punishment is one of the most important function the Court performs while making a selection from among different punishments, all the while maintaining a link between contemporary community values and the penal system. The scope of determining standards is never precise and rarely static. The Court must thus draw its meaning from the evolving standards of public morality and consciousness to mark the progress of a maturing society, with specific reference to the factual aspects of the case on hand.

#### **V. Is Punishment an End in Itself or a Means to an End**

Some theories of punishment look to the past, eg: those that emphasize the need to take vengeance on the wrongdoer or the necessity for expiation or retribution. The preventive theory concentrates on the prisoner and seeks to deter him from offending again in the future. The reformatory theory sees the readjustment of the prisoner to the demands of society as the greatest need of the criminal law. The deterrent theory emphasizes the necessity for protecting society and the incarceration of the prisoner that others will be deterred from breaking the law. No system of law adheres entirely to any particular theory. Even primitive law, supposedly based on vengeance, is also built on the hope of deterring others. Successful reform of the offender will prevent him from committing crimes again. Furthermore, the easiest way to prevent a prisoner from offending again is to hang him, but this can hardly be called a reformatory method.

The Hon’ble Supreme Court of India in the decision of *Narotam Singh V. State of Punjab AIR 1978 SC 1542* has cautioned that the reformatory approach of punishment should be

the object of criminal law, in order to promote rehabilitation without offending communal conscience and to secure social justice.

It is not the task of the State to punish sin, but only to adopt measures against certain social dangers (*Tannenbaum*). Any attempt to enforce an ethical code in its entirety by compulsion of the criminal law is foredoomed to failure. If expiation is the reason for punishment, then a prisoner should be convicted where he is ethically responsible for the act. Whether he will be free or not, it is now recognized that environment, physical factors and heredity play a greater part in the urge to crime than our forefathers thought. How much of our criminal law administrative system would stand an ethical searchlight? Clearly, the law must act to protect society, but it should not claim too lofty a justification for acts the reason for which it is more a necessity than morality.

As held by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in the case of *Siddarama and Others V. State of Karnataka* 2006(10) SCC673,

*"Imposition of sentence without considering its effect on the social order in many cases may be in reality a futile exercise. The social impact of a crime eg: where it relates to offences relating to narcotic drug or psychotropic substances which have a great impact not only on the health fabric but also on the social order and public interest, cannot be lost sight of and per se require exemplary treatment. Any liberal attitude by imposing meagre sentences or taking too sympathetic a view merely on account of lapse of time or personal inconveniences in respect of such offences will be counterproductive in the long run and against societal interest which needs to be cared for and strengthened by a string of deterrence inbuilt in the sentencing system."*

It is argued that the real test for criminality should be the extent to which the prisoner is endangering society, his act being treated as an index to his personality rather than as that alone which is deserving of punishment<sup>6</sup>. Some cases graphically show the shortcomings of our current methods. A man was convicted of rape in the year 1937. He was medically diagnosed as a psychopath, but not declared insane. Five years later he was released after serving his sentence after which he was convicted again of molesting two young girls. He was released after one year and then committed rape and murder, for which he was electrocuted (*Glueck*, 214-15). If we fully applied the test of the danger of the personality of the prisoner, it would change the principles on which the severity of the punishment is calculated, for a relatively innocuous act may be done by one who is in fact a danger to society, whereas a serious crime may be committed by one who is unlikely to

---

<sup>6</sup> Whitecross Paton, George. *A Textbook of Jurisprudence*, 4th ed, Oxford University Press



repeat the wrong (*ibid*, 216). The orthodox system, however, grants penalties on the basis of the criminal act that was committed and the subsequent harm that resulted as a consequence and does not place much emphasis on the likelihood of the prisoner offending again.

In the case of a lawyer or a doctor, the real punishment is not imprisonment, but his exclusion from the professional brotherhood, and even without imprisonment, he is less likely to offend again than one who suffers so no such loss.

## **VI. Conclusion**

There has been a growing shift in public perception of crime lately where white-collar crimes, hardcore terrorism, and narcotics have taken the center stage. These changes can be attributed to the emerging technology and profit-driven mindsets of the perpetrators apart from sociological changes. Technology-based fraud operations make detection more difficult and enable large scale surveillance of citizens which endangers national security and the privacy of the citizens. The State has to design and introduce new modes of investigation, trial and punishment for dealing with new generation crimes.

The tendency in the past has been to emphasize the wrongful act of the prisoner and to assume that the traditional methods of treatment achieve good results. Fifty years ago Holmes J asked: 'What have we better than a blind guess to show that the criminal law in its present form does more good than harm?' The cry is for individualisation of the penalty, not to let the punishment fit the crime, but the personality of the criminal.

There is thus a difference of opinion in every case between the needs of a particular prisoner and the social interest in enforcing the law. What may be the best treatment for a criminal may conflict with the necessity of deterring others (*Sayre*, 720). The real problem is therefore to combine the deterrent and reformatory theories of punishment in due proportions. The expense of research into appropriate methods and experimental treatment will be high- but what is the cost of crime to the community? To re-adjust and reformation of a prisoner so that they may play an important role in social life is in the long run a cheaper and more reasonable method than that of periodical sentences or life imprisonment. In conclusion, philosophical thinking with respect to punishment must be aimed at building up a Crime free Society for future generations to come.

## **Bibliography**

1. Nagin, Daniel S. "Criminal Deterrence Research at the Outset of the Twenty-First Century." *Crime and Justice*, vol. 23, 1998, pp. 1–42., <https://doi.org/10.1086/449268>.
2. Hendricks, Scotty. "Three philosophies of punishment and whether or not they work" *Big Think*, 30 Sept 2021, <https://bigthink.com/the-present/philosophy-of-punishment-and-penology/>
3. James, Erwin. "The Norwegian Prison Where Inmates Are Treated like People." *The Guardian*, 25 Nov. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/society/2013/feb/25/norwegian-prison-inmates-treated-like-people](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/feb/25/norwegian-prison-inmates-treated-like-people).
4. Walgrave, L., Aertsen, I. Reintegrative shaming and restorative justice. *Eur J Crim Policy Res* 4, 67–85 (1996). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02736714>.
5. Harris, Nathan. "Reintegrative Shaming, Shame, and Criminal Justice." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2006, pp. 327–46. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2006.00453.x>.
6. Pratyush, Shashwat. "Punishment: An Overview" *Penacclaims*, Vol. 10, May 2020, <http://www.penacclaims.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Shashwat-Pratyush.pdf>
7. Allhoff, Fritz. "Wrongful Convictions, Wrongful Acquittals, and Blackstone's Ratio", *Australasian Journal of Legal Philosophy*, 2018, [https://files.allhoff.org/research/Blackstone's\\_Ratio.pdf](https://files.allhoff.org/research/Blackstone's_Ratio.pdf)
8. Whitecross Paton, George. "A Textbook of Jurisprudence" 4th ed, Oxford University Press, 1972
9. Erskine Holland, Thomas with a new introduction by N R Madhava Menon. "Holland on Jurisprudence" 13th ed, Universal Law Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. 2014
10. Faris, Ellsworth. "The Origin of Punishment." *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 25, no. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1914, pp. 54–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2989562>.
11. Alexander, Julian P. "The Philosophy of Punishment." *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 13, no. 2, Northwestern University School of Law, 1922, pp. 235–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1133492>.
12. BENNETT, CLINTON. "Retribution in Islam (Qur'an 2:178): Fact and Fiction in Victorian Literature." *Victorian Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada, 2011, pp. 13–16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23646650>.
13. "How Is Crime Changing in the 21st Century? - Expert Panel on Emerging Crimes: Hosted by the Department of Justice, Canada. In Ottawa, Ontario, Canada." *Department of Justice, Government of Canada*, 7 Jan. 2015, [www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/crime/rr03\\_20/p1.html](http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/crime/rr03_20/p1.html).
14. McDonnell, Cyril. "Why Punish the Guilty? Towards a Philosophical Analysis of the State's Justification of Punishment" *Maynooth*, 18 September 2009, [https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/1550/1/MPP\\_2008\\_punishment\\_CMcD.pdf](https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/1550/1/MPP_2008_punishment_CMcD.pdf)

15. Fitzgerald, P.J. "Salmond on Jurisprudence", 12th ed, Universal Law Publication Co. Pvt. Ltd, 2010
16. Dias, R.W.M. "Dias Jurisprudence", 5th ed, Butterworths Law, 1985
17. N. Cardozo, Benjamin. "The Nature of the Judicial Process, 7th Indian Reprint, Universal Law Publication Co. Pvt. Ltd., 2008.
18. Indian Penal Code, 1860.
19. Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973.
20. Probation of offenders Act, 1958.

# ART AND DEATH: AN EXAMINATION OF ARTIST SUICIDES AND DESTRUCTIVE TENDENCIES IN THE LIGHT OF DEATH AS A CONSTRUCT

*Adhishri Aruman*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*Art has gained prominence in human lives over the past few years. Humans are evolving, so are the art forms. The content of art has taken big leaps and ranges to almost every domain of human life. The notion of the greatest arts has always been associated with tragedy, but do the best artists also come out of or land up in tragedy? Is there a safe space between the realms of art and reality? The discussion over artists and their involvement in art and how these arts might represent their mental states, emotional upheavals, is fairly new.*

*This is an experimental paper that delves into these questions, while making a claim on how artistic suicides are deaths constructed by the artists themselves as a consequence of the reducing gap between the realms of art and reality. Art and death are two very distinct and wide topics to be researched in the limited scope of a paper, and that is not the goal either. The paper primarily focuses on death as a construct with case studies on several artistic suicides and destructive tendencies in the process of creating an art.*

*Due to the dearth of research on this concept, this will be a fairly inconclusive paper, but definitely a call for further extensive research on it.*

**Keywords:** *Death, Art, Aesthetics, Artistic Suicides, Destructive Tendencies, Sylvia Plath, Rythm, Vincent Van Gogh.*

## Introduction

Before going on to an extensive discussion on the realm of art and unreality and to delve into the implications of art as a variable in artist suicides/deaths, we first need to understand the very basic premise: Death as a construct of the human mind.

Since the very advent of humankind, we have been struggling with the questions of human existence. The strive to understand life, purpose, world, reality, truth, existence, human nature is, and has been, for centuries, a never-ending, ever-evolving endeavour. One of the many reasons as to why we haven't been able to understand human nature and existence fully is the dearth of research on a very "existential phenomenon", death. (Heidegger, 284) In any conversation on human existence, death is presupposed<sup>1</sup>. And this is the fallacy. Human existence is a sum of life and death. If we want to understand it fully, we need to understand both life and death. While on the one hand, life has been deliberated upon too much, thoughts on death remain vague and ambiguous. Hence, the need for deliberation on death cannot be emphasized more.

## Death And Its Construction

Death can be defined as the negation of existence, as an end of a human life<sup>2</sup>. Death here, has to be seen as a purely physiological process, which results in the cessation of all human bodily functions, but is a consequence of the construction by our mind. Our bodies and minds are interdependent entities, both are essential for survival, neither can work without the other, and death is a phenomenon that occurs in relation to both. But mind holds more power on the body of an individual, as it is the mind that defines and manipulates the workings of our bodies. Our bodies work on the principle of preservation, and hence, they essentially try to save/preserve the individual. Our mind, on the other hand, works on ambiguous principles<sup>3</sup> of emotions and these principles define how we live and die. These principles construct our whole lives, every minute of it, and these are the very principles that construct our deaths.

Martin Heidegger in "Being and Time" talks of death in terms of something that Dasein begins constructing right when they come in this life, as a 'Being-towards death' (280, 296).

---

<sup>1</sup> "...to master this task successfully, we must presuppose that we are seeking in this investigation..." (Heidegger, 285)

<sup>2</sup> Death will be discussed purely in terms of human death here.

<sup>3</sup> These principles are ambiguous because the workings of mind haven't been clearly defined till now, research is in process.

He talks about death as not just a random characteristic, but a constitutive, it is always already there. That means that your whole life you are constructing your death, you are always conscious of how you will die.<sup>4</sup> He talks about the 'psychology' of dying and how much can that explain how a person lived. (ibid., 291)

The mind, in psychology is divided into two parts, the conscious and the subconscious.<sup>5</sup> (Murphy, 7) Everything that occurs in our lives is constructed by our mind in accordance with our environment, people around us, their suggestions<sup>6</sup> and other variables. Humans do not live in isolation. And therefore, there is a whole network of minds that is construed in the existence of humankind, which impact all the major events of history.<sup>7</sup> And since an individual constructs not just their own reality, but others' too, death can be called the highest degree of this construct. The principle of how these manifestations work is still not very clear, but a whole stream of psychology is devoted to this endeavour and they have been able to provide variety of proofs for the same.

Mind is of course not the only variable in a person's death, but it definitely plays a deciding role in the construction of a human death. Our mind takes in suggestions that we make to it on an everyday basis, the stronger the suggestion, the more it works towards constructing that into a reality. Our mind takes suggestions on face value, the better we understand the suggestion, the better can we condition our mind to it. And since we are always surrounded by suggestions that make us think that death is a destined event, that conditions our mind into believing the same.<sup>8</sup>

Assertions like "All men are mortal", "Humans are destined to die, death is inevitable", religious projects which are all about moving towards death, primitive peoples' ways of comporting themselves towards death in magic and cult<sup>14</sup> and other suggestive ways condition our mind into moving towards death, but at the same time, avoiding the thoughts of it. Even the "No one knows when they will die" helps in the construction of a sudden death. Therefore, we don't 'just die', our mind is constantly creating and constructing it. If death is to be taken as purely a mechanical process, then there is a huge possibility that we can construct it well, and maybe even calculate the exact time of our death.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger gives the example of the ripening of a fruit and how an 'unripe' fruit 'goes towards' ripening. (287,288)

<sup>5</sup> We are still discovering the principles and hence this distinction isn't fully valid and has been challenged.

<sup>6</sup> Suggestions include anything that we see, hear and grasp from environment, example of a negative suggestion - You should be ashamed.

<sup>7</sup> The idea of a collective consciousness in place, working towards manifesting the future of humankind.

<sup>8</sup> I am not saying that humans are immortal, just that this stops us from getting a better understanding of death.

<sup>9</sup> In 'Don't look up', a science fiction film, there is an allusion to a machine that can code your experiences to identify the exact way of your death, maybe the same can be done with the time in future.

## The Aesthetic Realm: Art And Unreality

It's a mammoth task in itself to define art, and that is a project to be taken in a separate paper. Hence, we will run with a rather simple and the most basic definition of art. Art is anything that stimulates human senses into evoking emotions such as happiness, sadness, warmth, solitude, fear, etc.<sup>10</sup> A very important characteristic of art is that it is always created by humans, termed artists. It is a product of the manipulation of various available materials in nature by the faculties of the human mind/brain.<sup>11</sup> It won't be wrong to say that art is a function of subjective human interpretations. A single piece of art can be looked at from various perspectives<sup>12</sup>, and perspective is a property of the mind<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the realm of art is not the worldly realm, not the realm of the existing, not the realm of the true or real. It is the realm of the ideal, the untrue and the unreal. It is the realm of the imaginative, the mind.

Jean Paul Sartre in his 'The work of art' talks about the existential type of work of art as an unreality. He takes the example of a sculpture/painting of Charles VIII and claims how we can only have the aesthetic experience if we negate the canvas and frame and intentionally imagine the aesthetic object 'Charles VIII'. The canvas, paints, frame, stone, and everything material forms the material analogue of the art and the aesthetic object only realised in our imagination, in our mind. According to him, beauty is a value of unreality and can only be realised imaginatively. The reality on the other hand is nauseous, miserable. This distinction is important because this situates art in a realm that can be used to escape reality. (32,33,34)

Paul Valery in 'The Idea of Art' calls uselessness one of the chief characteristics of art. According to him, our senses mostly filter out that which is not important (function of body), but sometimes they essentially dwell on that which is of no use to us (function of mind) and they impose a necessity on us. Therefore, there is a whole arena of human activity which is useless and not necessary for the "immediate preservation" or survival of an individual, which is opposed to any intellectual activity, and hence, holds us in an illusion<sup>14</sup> while we are in the aesthetic realm.

---

<sup>10</sup> Emotions invoked by art are mostly different from the aforementioned, and cannot be restricted in the terms set by the linguists.

<sup>11</sup> Human mind and brain are to be seen as equivalents here, we are talking about a very physiological conception. Mind will be used, just for the sake of understanding.

<sup>12</sup> Broadly from the perspective of the artist and the audience. It still differs from person-to-person.

<sup>13</sup> Similar to Kant's faculty of imagination.

<sup>14</sup> Both artist and audience.

The aesthetic realm is for pleasing the mind, body's pleasure is different from that of the mind. The pleasure we derive out of bathing, eating or taking a nap is very different from the pleasure we derive from a piece of art. This distinction is based on the fact that in appreciating art, we value the appearance of the art object and not its actual existence<sup>15</sup> (Art Experience, Hiriyana, 34). And hence it's the mind, and not the body, that is conditioned to fall in the trap of the unreal aesthetic realm.

Therefore, there is a very strong need to keep art and reality separate, to understand the implications of the blurring of such boundaries.

### **The Ideal Of A 'perfection Achieved By Terror' And Art**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his lectures on the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' claims that the final perfection can only be achieved in and by work under terror inspired by fearing the absolute power, inspired in him by his master.<sup>16</sup> It is only in this terror that he becomes conscious of the "seriousness" of his existence. (Kojève, 23) We are surrounded by notions that tell us that the final perfection is the almighty, absolute, and something that cannot be achieved in this life, that is only attainable after death, in a certain afterlife or liberation. This inspires in human consciousness the idea of escaping the joys of life<sup>17</sup> and moving towards death.

The greatest arts being bred out of an artist's personal turmoil, coming from a very dark place has been brought up too often in the recent times. And that resembles what Hegel claims. We are creating notions of an art bred under self-imposed terror or a traumatic life forming the best of arts. And this conditions the artist into believing the same.

There are two scenarios that occur in the context of an artist. First, the reality of the artist is extremely traumatized and the artist is already under mortal terror which reflects in their art.<sup>18</sup> Or the artist has to bring great torment upon themselves in order to arouse the emotional appeal required for the art, which then reflects on their reality.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, an artist ends up blurring the boundaries between the aesthetic realm and the realm of the reality and conditions their mind into believing that death is the only possible way of achieving perfection, and therefore starts moving towards it. This will be further illustrated in the case studies on various artists.

---

<sup>15</sup> 'We value the semblance above the reality.'

<sup>16</sup> In this case, the idea of a master is God, anything that drives an artist to work towards art.

<sup>17</sup> Again, this depends a lot on the social factors and environment of an individual.

<sup>18</sup> As in the case of Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Vincent Van Gogh, which will be taken up later in the paper.

<sup>19</sup> As in the case of Tehching Hsieh, Chris Burden and Marina Abramovich.



### Case Studies On Artist Suicides Or Destructive Tendencies

The recent tradition of art has been evolving to delve more into the personalized accounts of an artist, ranging from not just films, books, poetry, paintings and music, but also the domain is extending to new non-genre arts such as performances, installations, etc. One of the main reasons for this obsession with making an artist the “material analogue”<sup>20</sup> (Sartre, 33) is the institutionalization of art. Art has become an industry and there is a race between artists to excel, to create something new on every other occasion. This has made art their realities, rather than an escape from it.

The cases of mental illnesses and suicides amongst artist have been constantly increasing. According to a recent study, artists are now 25% more likely to carry genes for mental illness. (“The suicidal Artist”, *Psychology Today*) Art consists in displaying the illusion of feelings, not creating and recreating them. The artist in the creation of his art lives completely in an unreal way. (Sartre, 35) The dichotomy between art and mental health has become so fraught that artists have started associating their creative abilities with a mental illness, curing which might make them lose their ability to create art. David Foster Wallace, a patient of crippling depression, has often expressed this fear of losing his ability to be creative if he recovered. (“The suicidal Artist”, *Psychology Today*)

Sylvia Plath’s “The Bell Jar”, one of her most exceptional works, is a fictional narrative of her own mental state at the time of writing the book. In the book, the character is consciously contemplating death, her whole life revolves around death, she finds the idea calming, soothing, escaping, scary but fascinating. One can easily read into Plath’s own state of mind through the book. And not just the book, her collection of poems has showcased the same. People have been able to read the mental states of Virginia Woolf and Vincent Van Gogh in their works. So is the case with many other famous suicides of Heath Ledger, Ernest Hemingway, John Minton and, Kurt Cobain, who before his death by suicide even expressed his desire of dying for art. The very fact that we are able to read their real emotional states into the illusory aesthetic realm is proof that the safe space between the two realms was transcended.

Another idea that has been very prominent these days is the idea of the evolving genres of art accumulative of performing arts. Tehching Hsieh, known for his One Year Performances and Cage Piece, had himself locked in a cage for a year, without reading, writing or talking. Chris Burden, let himself get shot in the arm, for the performance of his

---

<sup>20</sup> Sartre talks about a person becoming a ‘material analogue’ when they are imaginatively intended as the objects of art.

piece, 'Shot'. Marina Abramovic, in her performance of Rhythms, made herself the object of art, creating a dialogue with the audience through various destructive measures.<sup>21</sup>

The institutionalization and evolution of art forms has resulted in the creation of some fallacious beliefs about art and artists, which working as suggestions are continuously impacting the mental health of artists and conditioning them to move towards the greatest torment, death.

## Conclusion

The paper aimed to question the boundaries of art and reality and investigate the nature of artist suicides and destructive tendencies. Even though we haven't been able to identify a uniform pattern amongst these artists, we have definitely established the reducing gap between art and reality and the need to address the issue at hand. This paper is a part of the wider analysis of how humans move towards death, and there is no definite conclusion that can be reached, the paper only wishes to posit questions to be further researched, questions of death, art, artist suicides, performances, and most importantly, the broad human nature.

## Bibliography

Heidegger, Martin. "Dasein's possibility of Being-a-whole, and Being-towards-death". *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962.

Hiriyana, M. "Art Experience - 2". *Art Experience*. New ed., Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Manohar Publishers and distributors, 1997.

Kinsella, Eileen. "A Young New York Artist's Death Devastated a Community. Now Friends Say It Was All a Cruel Performance—and She's Still Alive". *Artnet News*. Artnet Worldwide Corporation, 14 May 2019, [www.google.com/amp/s/news.artnet.com/art-world/ayakamay-death-1538899/amp-page](http://www.google.com/amp/s/news.artnet.com/art-world/ayakamay-death-1538899/amp-page). Accessed 15 March 2022.

Kojeve, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Translated by James H. Nichols, Jr., Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

---

<sup>21</sup> Read more here: "Marina Abramovic Rhythm 0." *Guggenheim*, [www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5177](http://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5177).

Morrison, Ewan. "The Suicidal Artist". *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, 2 April 2019, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/word-less/201904/the-suicidal-artist](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/word-less/201904/the-suicidal-artist). Accessed 15 March 2022.

Murphy, Joseph. *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*. Thomson Press India Limited.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Rupa and Co, 1995.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Work of Art". *Aesthetics*, edited by Harold Osborne, Oxford University Press, 1972.

Spector, Nancy. "Marina Abramovic Rhythm 0." *Guggenheim*, [www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5177](http://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5177). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Accessed 15 March 2022.

Valery, Paul. "The Idea of Art." *Aesthetics*, edited by Harold Osborne, Oxford University Press, 1972.

## GENDER & SEXUALITY IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM

*Sulekha Kumari Das, Tracey James and Vani Agnihotri*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to examine the doctrine of Theravada Buddhism and its manifestation in contemporary Theravada societies. Because Theravada is the oldest school of Buddhism and is based primarily on Buddha's teachings, an attempt has been made to understand the true intentions and purpose of his teachings and how they have unfolded over time. By juxtaposing the earlier and later Buddhist texts of the Pali canon, the paper critically analyzes the sexist and misogynistic tendencies in Theravada Buddhism and its contemporary implications through the examples of Thailand and Sri Lanka.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Pali Canon, Women, Therigatha, Misogyny, Sex, Sexuality, Gender.*

## Introduction

Deviating from the definition of Religion in the “Western sense”, Buddhism, as dealt within this paper, must be looked at as a set of “guiding morals” that shape a **way of life**- a life of sufferings (or dukkha) which an individual can be liberated from, as mentioned in the **Four Noble Truths** - the truth of suffering; the truth of the cause of suffering; the truth of the end of suffering; and the Eightfold Path, the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

Theravada Buddhism, as the focal point of this study, is the most ancient branch of extant Buddhism today. It is the closest (as is claimed) to the original teachings of Gautama Buddha and sets itself apart from the other two sects of Buddhism: Mahayana and Vajrayana. It relies on the **Pali Canon: the three Tripitakas (Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, Abhidhamma Pitaka)** that comprise Buddha's teachings. Here, it is also important to acknowledge that whatever Gautama Buddha had preached was restricted to oral transmission for several years following his death, until it was committed to being written down by a select few. Thus, the textual tradition in Theravada Buddhism is subject to **several interpretations** dependent on individual inclinations that consequently lead to an inherent tension among various viewpoints.

## Gender And Sexuality In Theravada Buddhism

Before delving into the concept of gender as understood in Buddhist philosophy, there are certain questions that must be addressed. What role does religion play in the formation of social conceptions of gender? Do claims about men and women in a religious-philosophical text affect a society's perception of what it means to be a woman or a man? (Cabezón xiv) Conversely, do the societal conceptions of gender and surrounding culture impact religious texts and institutions?

To begin with, any research into Buddhism must establish a distinction between Buddha and Buddhism. As Dr. Gupta asserted, it is imperative to understand that Buddha never preached or wrote anything, what he did was merely experience the obstacles in the path to enlightenment, overcame them through his own efforts and later systemized his realizations into a philosophy to help others. He was focused more on the **psychological** than the physical state of being and was therefore, largely gender neutral. Besides **religion is essentially a social phenomena** interacting with other traditions, and influencing yet accommodating social norms and practices. Therefore, what came to be popularly referred to as Buddhism was a result of the absurd intermingling of Buddha's

sayings with the norms that shaped the “defective mind-set” of the Brahmanic patriarchal society during that time.

In his work, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism” Alan Sponberg contends that early Buddhists did believe that sexuality entailed a set of biologically given characteristics that shaped one’s abilities and capacities, even if it did not necessarily determine them. However, they overlooked the fact that, “sexual identity is as much socially constructed as it is biologically given”. (11) In simple words, while early Buddhists acknowledged the idea of sex, they feigned ignorance over the concept of gender. Was this an honest mistake or a well thought out process to maintain social harmony?

**“Straight’ is the name that Road is called, and ‘Free  
From Fear’ the Quarter whither thou art bound.  
Thy Chariot is the ‘Silent Runner’ named,  
With Wheels of Righteous Effort fitted well.  
Conscience the Leaning board; the Drapery  
Is Heedfulness; the Driver is the Dharma,  
I say, and Right Views, they that run before.  
And be it woman, or be it man for whom  
Such chariot doth wait, by that same car  
Into Nirvana’s\* presence shall they come.”  
- Samyutta\* Nikaya\*; I.5.6 (qtd. in Sponberg 9)**

The above excerpt from the **Samyutta Nikaya** clearly reflects an attempt to locate virtue and spiritual potential beyond the conventional social and gender distinctions. (Sponberg 11) It not only recognizes women’s potential to attain nirvana but also includes them soteriologically. And since dhamma is considered beyond the boundaries of gender, any distinction between men and women is of little significance to the project of enlightenment. In fact, canonical sources note that among Gautama’s most prominent patrons were women.(Sponberg 6) Even within Therigatha, an anthology of poems by and about the first Buddhist women, there is an excerpt on Mara telling a Theri, Soma:

**“It is hard to get to the place that sages want to reach,  
It’s not possible for a woman,  
Especially not one with only two fingers’ worth of wisdom.  
Soma replies  
What does being a woman have to do with it?**

**What counts is that the heart is settled  
And that one sees what really is.  
What you take as pleasures are not for me,  
The mass of mental darkness is split open.  
Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished.” (Therigatha 29)**

When the poem quoted above was discussed, Dr Gupta pointed out that ‘Mara’ was not necessarily a personification of death/or a demon- these were mental ideas antagonistic to Theravada Buddhism.

The women, responsible for creating the Therigatha were known as ‘Theris’ or the ‘senior ones’ amongst ordained Buddhist women. They wore that epithet because of their religious achievements. These theris were enlightened women and most of the poems in the anthology are songs of their experiences. Dhammapala, a commentator on the Therigatha in the sixth century, referred to these poems as ‘Udanas,’ or inspired utterances, thus associating the Therigatha with a venerable Buddhist speech genre. The Therigatha is the world’s first anthology of female literature. Therigatha’s poems were given in Pali, a ‘perfected language’ based on several of the south’s vernaculars in ancient times. The Therigatha depicts a cluster of smaller groups of women united by shared experiences and compassion with one another, rather than a single monastic order ruled by a single rule, Vinaya.

The world of the ordained women in the Therigatha is one of sexual equality, which is in stark contrast to the social inequalities between men and women in lay life. It is a keen insistence on the possibility of freedom for women as well as for men. This is especially obvious in the celebration of attainment of enlightenment with the declaration of “knowing the three things that most don’t know.” These are tevijja in Pali, the ability to know one’s past lives, the ability to know where and why other beings are reborn, and the ability to know that one’s own moral corruptions have been eliminated.

The notion of tevijja in early Buddhism explicitly triggers association with ideas in Brahmanical Hinduism about trayi vidya, knowledge of the three vedas. When the theris declare that they know the three things that most do not know, they are not only making a joyful affirmation of the attainment, they are rejecting Brahmanical assumptions that no woman of any caste was capable of attaining “the three knowledges.”(Hallisey 35)

### **Roles Of Models Of Leadership Found In Therigatha**

There were several outstanding Theris during the time of Buddha who could be great role models and examples of leadership. However, two Theris are sufficient for analyzing the leadership.

### **1. Theri Mahapajapati**

She was a queen before renouncing her identity to become a nun. When she decided to become a Theri, she showed her strong will by leaving the palace, shaving her head, putting on a ragged robe and walking a long distance barefoot, begging Buddha to accept her into nunnery order. Mahapajapati's initial strong commitment to renounce her high status and her strive to seek spiritual life is praiseworthy. Queen Mahapajapati also accepted the Eight Chief Rules of Almswomen or Gurudhamma.

### **2. Patacara Theri**

Patacara Theri prior to being a Theri was raised in a merchant-class family. She lost her whole family in a very short period of time, which was an extremely miserable stage of her life. First, she lost her husband to a poisonous snakebite, her newly born son from being picked up by a hawk, a toddler son from being carried away by the strong current of a river, and her parents and brother, killed by a storm. These tragedies drove her to insanity and that's when she met Buddha - who saved her, gave her food, clothes and preached the doctrine of Impermanence to her. Soon after studying this doctrine, she rebuilt herself and joined the Nunnery order.

Overemphasizing these existing accounts of the soteriological inclusiveness<sup>1</sup> and tales of female leadership from the early Buddhist time period, Buddhist Feminists<sup>2</sup> like Rita Gross claim that "Buddhism is Feminism and Feminism is Buddhism". (Gross 216) However, one might ask at this juncture: Is soteriological inclusiveness enough for a religion to be termed as progressive and egalitarian? And were the conditions for this inclusion egalitarian or at least favorable to women?

**"To go forth under the rule of the Dharma as announced by me is not suitable for women. There should be no Garudharma ordination or nunhood. And why? If women go forth from the household life, then the rule of the dharma will not be maintained over a long period. It is just as if , O Ananda, there were a family**

---

<sup>1</sup> Soteriological inclusiveness is a term signifying women's potential to attain nirvana.

<sup>2</sup> Buddhist Feminists is a term referring to contemporary scholarship that traces parallels between Buddhism and Feminist understanding of equality between race, gender, class, sexuality and nationality.



**with many women and few men. It is subject to easy attack, specifically, of thieves and robber bands.” (qtd. in Byrne 183)**

Implicit in this reference of Buddha's initial hesitation to ordain women, as mentioned in the Pali canon, is a specific concern towards the vulnerability of a sangha where nuns outnumbered the monks. An additional remark, that with the entry of women in the sangha, the dhamma would last only 500 years instead of 1,000, was also made. It is interesting to note that women were left in this same situation of vulnerability that Buddha wanted to avoid when their husbands, sons or fathers became monks. (Byrne 184)

Nonetheless, as tradition records, Buddha instituted the order of the nuns under the condition that bhikkhunis follow the **8 additional rules of Garudhammas** as mentioned in the **Bhikkhunivibhanga of the Pali Vinaya**. Violation of any of these rules would lead to expulsion from ordination.

- “1. In the presence of monks, O Ananda, women are expected to request ordination to go forth as nuns.**
- 2. In the presence of monks, O Ananda, a nun must seek the teachings and instructions every half month.**
- 3. No nun may spend a rainy season, O Ananda, in a place where monks are resident.**
- 4. After the rainy season a nun must have both orders [monks and nuns] perform the ‘end of rainy season’ ceremony for her with reference to the seeing, hearing, or suspicion [of faults committed by her].**
- 5. It is forbidden that a nun, O Ananda, accuse or warn a monk about transgression in morality, heretical views, conduct or livelihood.**
- 6. A nun, O Ananda, should not scold or be angry with a monk.**
- 7. When a nun violates important rules, O Ananda, penance must be performed every half month.**
- 8. A nun of a hundred years of age shall perform the correct duties to a monk. She shall, with her hands folded in prayerful attitude, rise to greet him and then bow down to him. This will be done with the appropriate words of salutation.”**  
**(qtd. In Byrne 183)**

While these rules are clearly sexist and reduce women to a position subservient to the monks within the sangha, they are highly controversial and are contested by many bhikkhunis who claim to have found evidence that they were not really the teachings of Gautama Buddha. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that these rules continue to

adversely affect the lives of nuns within the sangha in Theravada Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar.

## **Emergence Of Misogyny & Sexism In Theravada Buddhism**

Misogyny and sexism are two words that are rarely (if at all ever) used while describing or talking about Buddhism, at least in casual conversations. However, scholars have been more attentive to the differential treatment meted out to various genders especially in Theravada Buddhism. Below we will examine certain viewpoints of the Buddhist scholars and try to understand what they term as misogynist or sexist within the Theravadian sect.

### **1. The Portrayal of Buddha as an Ultra Masculine Figure**

In the Pali canon, there are elaborate texts focusing upon the thirty-two major physical characteristics<sup>3</sup> of a great man which include flat feet, hidden ankles etc.. Even some of the epithets given to Buddha only solidify this preoccupation with his physical form like 'bull of a man', 'elephant of a man', 'manly lion' etc. Hence, Buddha not only possesses a great mind but also a **great physicality** which makes him the '**ultimate man**'. Such a description obviously makes it difficult to imagine a woman as Buddha. An explanation for such a portrayal of Buddha as given by **Buddhaghosa** (one of the most well-known Theravadian philosophers and a prolific writer) is that the physical body of a buddha impresses worldly people, and because of this, they readily accept him and rely upon him to guide them to enlightenment. (Powers, 26)

### **2. The Portrayal of Women in Buddhist Texts**

**Negative portrayal** of women as seductresses or evil demonesses is fairly common in the early texts of Buddhism especially in the Jatakas. As **Naomi Appleton** notes, women are shown to be lustful, unreliable, morally depraved, dishonest, vicious, cannibalistic and in possession of magical powers that they use to seduce monks. To demonstrate, here is a direct albeit translated quote from the Kunala Jataka, "*Though a man may be their loving, kind and tender companion for a long time; though he may be dear to them as their own*

---

<sup>3</sup> The thirty-two major physical traits include- 1. flat feet 2. palms and soles are marked with thousand spoked wheels 3. projecting heels 4. long fingers and toes 5. soft and tender hands and feet 6. webbed fingers and toes 7. hidden ankles 8. legs like an antelope's 9. can touch his knees in a standing posture with either hand without bending 10. penis covered by a sheath 11. golden-coloured skin 12. skin so smooth and delicate that no dust settles on it 13. one hair for each pore, curled to the right 14. each hair turns upward and curls to the right 15. body grows straight like Brahm; compact thighs 16. body has seven protuberances 17. torso like a lion 18. no indentation between the shoulders 19. physical proportions like a banyan tree 20. bust is equally rounded 21. supremely acute sense of taste 22. jaw like a 23. forty teeth 24. even teeth 25. teeth close together, no gaps 26. white and lustrous teeth 27. long and slender tongue 28. divine voice like Brahma 29. blue-black eyes 30. eyelashes like a 31. tuft of hair between the eyebrows 32. prominent lump on top of the cranium.

*life, yet in time of distress or misfortune they leave him. Therefore, I do not confide in women.” (qtd. in 106)*

While it may be argued that the stories of demonesses and seductresses aim to criticize monks that are easily waylaid by women and not the women themselves; a counter-argument would be that women are portrayed as obstacles in a man’s path to liberation. It is true that some stories slander only ‘some’ and not ‘all’ women; however, in many instances including the example mentioned above- sweeping negative generalisations on women have been made. Moreover, even Buddhaghosa once commented that when a monk is alone in a remote place, he might encounter a woman who will attempt to seduce him. (Powers 116)

Another common and discriminatory observation is the notion that sexual deviants such as hermaphrodites, homosexuals etc. are unsuitable for monastic life because they are more lustful than other people. Herein again, women are dragged in and slandered when **Buddhaghosa** likens sexual deviants to prostitutes and wanton young girls who have no self-control. (Powers, 82)

**Positive portrayal** of women in the Pali canon is also highly problematic as they exist only in relation to their male companions, aiding them in their path to liberation. They are depicted as ideal mothers and wives who are both loyal and supportive. Examples of this would be Buddha’s wife Yashodhara and step mother Mahaprajapati. Even in the Jatakas, women occupy a secondary and subservient role. Like in the **Ucchanga-jataka** where a woman saves her husband, brother and son from prison, showcasing that even in the rare cases where a woman plays an active and positive role in the jatakas, they are only supporting the lives and the progress of the men that they are associated with. (Appleton 108)

### **3. Overall Visibility of Women Including Soteriological Inclusiveness**

Pali literature holds out no possibility of a woman becoming Buddha as exclusively male pronouns are used in relation to the state of *Buddhahood*. **Jean Byrne** even points out that in the Theravadian literature, there are very few female arhats (‘enlightened beings’). According to her, such a lack of representation of female arhats seems to suggest that either women can’t become enlightened, or that women’s spiritual aptitude is not as great as men’s, given that they do not earn arhat status as easily. (185-186)

### **4. The Notions of Gender Transformation and Rebirth**

There is an assumption in Indian Buddhist literature that rebirth as a human male is the result of cultivation of past merit over many lives and that rebirth as a woman is a result of bad karma in the past life. This is perhaps why the **Bodhisatta** maintains his male-ness throughout his jataka stories even when he takes the form of an animal or god. This implies that a man feels more connected to a male animal than a female of his own species. Some feminist scholars, such as **Rita Gross**, see this as a negative comment on women. (43)

In the texts, there is a clear bias in favor of the male bodies which is assumed to be stronger and more conducive to development of self-control. **Buddhaghosa** even says that a man who commits many grave offenses may be changed into a woman in this very life as retribution. Conversely, a woman who performs good deeds may be spontaneously transformed into a man. (Powers 125-126)

Further, multiple links have been drawn between the physical beauty of a man and his virtuousness. For example, **Reiko Ohnuma** noted the linkage between physical beauty and moral excellence in the Jatakas. She wrote, *"this is a world in which physical features are always indicative of moral status, and moral attainments must be reflected by their corresponding physical effects."* (qtd. in Powers 248)

So far we have established that there appears to be an inconsistency in the Buddhist attitude towards women as reflected in the often contrasting views in early and later Buddhist texts. It is evident that after Sakyamuni's death, the politics within the sangha enabled Asian Theravadian monks to exploit the ambiguity in earlier texts and insist that even though women have access to the dhamma, "sexual differences are real and that the male sex is by nature superior to the female sex, both socially and spiritually". (Spongberg 12)

### **Contemporary Manifestation**

While the nuns outnumbered the monks within the sangha in the early Buddhist time period, the contemporary period has seen their decline in Theravada countries. This prompted us to examine the factors that led to their decline and practical disappearance from the sanghas in Theravada Buddhist countries today and how it contravenes the Buddhist idea of soteriological inclusiveness.

**Mr. Joshi** shed light on gruesome stories of the mass slaughter of bhikkhunis in India and Sri Lanka on not one but multiple instances in history. The first phase included

Pushyamitra Shāgh, who initiated a mass plunder of monasteries and murder of monks and nuns. In fact, in the second phase around 9 million books are believed to have been destroyed in a fire that lasted a month during Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Bihar leading to the loss of both the lives and literary compositions of Buddhist monks and nuns. This is also a primary reason for a dearth of material available on feminist Buddhist literature. After this attack, many bhikkhus and bhikkhunis fled east to save their lives. (Joshi)

In the article "Why I am not a Buddhist Feminist", Jean Byrne has chronicled her experience of visiting the modern day sanghas in Thailand. On her visit, the Australian scholar witnessed that:

- The nuns meditated for longer than the monks, slept in smaller quarters than the monks and shared their quarters with visitors.
  - Not only were the nuns unable to give formal teachings to the monks regardless of their experience; but
  - They also ate poor quality food at tables with non-monastic visitors while the monks sat on raised platforms receiving donations of exquisite food for their meals.
- (181)

In fact, it is illegal for women to take full ordination as a bhikkhuni in Thailand as per a 1928 law. This is based on the belief that only senior bhikkhunis could initiate new women into the order and since the Theravada bhikkhuni sangha died out centuries earlier, any new attempt to ordain women by senior bhikkhus was a violation of the Vinaya. (Lieberman) Thus, efforts at reviving the nun's order in Thailand were met with great hostility and punishment, with numerous cases of the officials imprisoning any monk attempting to ordain bhikkhunis. In light of such atrocity, some Theravadin women choose to take an informal and limited set of vows such as the maechi in Thailand and thilashin in Myanmar. (Winn)

### **Preserving the Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka**

Buddhists in Sri Lanka managed to preserve their Buddhist heritage for four hundred years of colonial oppression by the Dutch, Portuguese, and British. They have instituted a tradition of Buddhist education that extends from the primary level up to university. Today, all Sri Lankan Buddhists follow the Theravada tradition, with an emphasis on male monasticism. Women are strong supporters of temples and meditation centers, teaching and facilitating Dharma schools for children, but the monastic option was closed to them until recently, because the bhikkhuni ordination lineage was discontinued in Sri Lanka in

the eleventh century.(IGNCA 124) Since the 1920s, individual women began to live a celibate lifestyle and observe the ten precepts, becoming known as *dasasil mata*. In 1987, a quiet revolution began after a group of sixteen Sri Lankan nuns and other common masses attended the first Sakyadhita conference in Bodhgaya and learned about the existence of a bhikkhuni lineage that had transmitted to China from Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE. Today, there are an estimated 2,000 bhikkhunis (Sangharakshita 267) in Sri Lanka, in addition to an equal number of nuns who continue to practice as *dasasil matas*.

### **Defiance Of Conservative Norms**

Women's life in South Asian Buddhist societies are undergoing radical transformations in the modern era. Using Buddhist principles and practices, women and their allies are assisting in redressing the gender imbalance that exists in South Asian Buddhist societies. Furthermore, the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women in South Asia has worked to ensure that women have equal access to all parts of Buddhist life, particularly education and ordination. In recent years, the volume of research and publications by and about Buddhist women has grown substantially. (Bapat 234). However, one of the foremost challenges is to provide more and better education for girls. At the time of Buddha, women had access to his teachings, but after his death, as the great Buddhist learning centers developed and flourished in India, women were excluded. They were not allowed to enroll in the large monastic universities like Nalanda and Vikramasila, or those in Tibet or South India. Even now, doors to these huge monastic universities remain closed for women. (IGNCA 35)

### **Conclusion**

There is no perfect religion in the world, and there is certainly no religion in the world that has done justice to women, but Buddha provided women with a voice at a time when other religions suppressed them entirely. (Joshi) This is not to deny the politics that has seeped into the sangha after Buddha's death or to belittle the sufferings of nuns in Theravada Buddhist countries, but to forge a new path for women by returning to Buddha's sayings-

**“Now Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'these qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities**

**are, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness'- then you should enter and remain in them."**

**-Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya (qtd. in. Thanissaro)**

The above excerpt reflects Buddha's insistence of believing neither religious traditions nor pure rational thought and logic but our own experience. A return to this wisdom provides a much-needed window for Buddhist women striving to break free from the discrimination they face both within and outside the sangha.

Despite our best efforts, a paper does have certain limitations. Since Buddha never preached or wrote anything himself and the *Tripitakas* or the three baskets were written by his not-yet enlightened disciples, the possibilities of misinterpretation and further loss of meaning and essence through multiple translations are not entirely impossible. While Indo-Aryan languages such as Sinhalese and Hindi have done some amount of justice to the original text, the same cannot be said for English commentaries which we have hugely relied upon for this paper. For instance, religion is not the appropriate translation for "dhamma". Further, owing to the constraints of time and space, on-spot field research in the form of interviews with Theravadin bhikkhus and bhikkhunis couldn't be conducted. As such, any future research in the area must endeavor to understand original texts or their Indo-Aryan translations to better interpret the original intention and meaning of the Tripitakas. Interaction with practicing Buddhists can also aid research and understanding of the contradictions in beliefs and practices as witnessed in early and later Buddhist texts as well as its practical implications.

Hence, it can be concluded that while the Theravada sect of Buddhism was one of earliest religious traditions to have included women soteriologically at par with their male counterparts, a number of sexist and misogynistic tendencies appear after the death of Buddha, either as a result of existing social practices or with the entry of politics within the sangha. With time, these practices have consolidated and proved detrimental to women within the fold of Theravada Buddhism, who continue to argue against and struggle to achieve their rights. In light of these circumstances, textual traditions have emerged as the major tool to contend with the idea of 'soteriological inclusiveness' that women believe was granted to them by Buddha, necessitating a juxtaposition of the early and later Buddhist texts in the Pali canon.

## **Works Cited**

Appleton, Naomi. "In the Footsteps of the Buddha?" : Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27(1), Indiana University Press, Spring 2011, pp. 33-51.

Appleton, Naomi. "Temptress on the Path: Women as Objects and Subjects in Buddhist Jataka Stories". *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, 2010, pp. 103-115.

Bapat. Purushottam, "2500 Years of Buddhism," *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India*.

Byrne. Jean. "Why I am not a Buddhist Feminist: A Critical Examination of Buddhist Feminism." *Feminist Theology* 21(2), Sage Publications, 2013, pp. 180-194. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0966735012464149>

Cabezón, Jose Ignacio. *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*. State University of New York Press, 1992, p. xiv.

Gross, Rita. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. State University of New York Press, 1993, pp. 43-223.

Gupta, Aditya Kumar. Interview. Conducted by Sulekha Das, Tracey James & Vani Agnihotri, 25 September 2021. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vx\\_nh-rCxEKF-vLoL7dXr1TwpGmjNXwG/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vx_nh-rCxEKF-vLoL7dXr1TwpGmjNXwG/view?usp=sharing)

International Conference on Women and Buddhism: "Perspectives on Gender, Culture and Empowerment," *IGNCA publication*, 2017.

Joshi, Mohit. Interview. Conducted by Sulekha Das, Tracey James & Vani Agnihotri, 27 September 2021. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hO9ivsMi2wlc0BZTEsM45LkSvf6c3nTP/view?usp=sharing>  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eCNocNYWj0whSLmy-5G1cmrnJXDS54lq/view?usp=sharing>

Lieberman, Amy. "Thailand's Female Monks (cautiously) lobby for Legal Recognition." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 September 2011. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2011/0908/Thailand-s-female-monks-cautiously-lobby-for-legal-recognition>



Powers, John. *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, Harvard University Press, 2009, pp.26-248.

Sangharakshita, "A Survey of Buddhism: Doctrines and Methods Through The Ages," *Samyak Prakashan*, 2013.

Sponberg, Alan. "Attitudes Towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism" *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, edited by Jose Ignacio Cabezon., State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 6-15.

Thanissaro, Bhikkhu. "Lost in Quotation" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Fall 2012. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/lost-quotation/>

Tsomo. Karma, "Buddhist women of South Asia: Traditions and Transformations," *IGNCA publication*, 2015.

Winn, Patrick. "Thailand's top female monk hacked the system to bring women into the fold." *Global Post*, 5 July 2016. 3:15 PM EDT. <https://theworld.org/stories/2016-07-05/thailand-s-top-female-monk-hacked-system-bring-women-fold>

# RETHINKING NEPOTISM: DO PRIVATE OBLIGATIONS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER PUBLIC ONES?

*Arushi Garg*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*The recent death of a young bollywood actor, sushant singh rajput, has re-triggered the debate around Nepotism, which seems to pervade all sections of the media (Kukreja). The extreme backlash that certain celebrities faced in the aftermath of the young actor's death hints at a deeper social reality. It exposed the underlying distaste the common man harbors for the perpetuation of privilege. Though nepotism and privilege permeate all echelons of society, especially politics and business, the film industry overtly exemplifies these flaws and constraints.*

*The common perception of nepotism is that it is inherently bad. However this negative view of nepotism is a culmination of various factors and a product of socio-cultural history.*

*Nepotism is a serious matter because, directly or indirectly, it bears on the formation of 'elites' in a society. And despite being viewed with suspicion, an upper class is a practical necessity for any society (Bellow). Hence, considering the prevalence and ubiquitous impact of nepotism, this paper aims to examine the underlying causes, the predominant arguments for and against Nepotism within the business context.*

**Keywords:** *Favoritism, private obligations, impartiality, merit.*

## Introduction

The ethicality of nepotism is a topic that dominates public discourse today, and the general opinion on it is overwhelmingly negative. From politics to business to the film industry, all sectors are getting increasingly filled with the offspring of established parents. This violates our basic sense of fairness and elicits revulsion and anger toward those who practice nepotism and those who profit from it (Bellow). Under the Trump administration, nepotism ran rampant in the White House; he filled the top positions with his family members and loyalists. He hired his son-in-law Jared Kushner as a senior White House adviser, and gave a similar role to his daughter Ivanka Trump. His appointees were highly underqualified, incompetent and leveraged their position for personal gain, which led to distrust and public unrest.

In contrast, political parties in India have a demonstrated preference for perpetuating political dynasties. For example, the Scindia political lineage is still going strong, despite switching loyalties. According to a survey conducted by Carnegie Endowment for Peace in 2014, 46 percent of Indians said that they would “prefer” voting for a candidate who comes from a political family. Paradoxically, the Indian film industry has been heavily criticized and subject to public outrage for egregious nepotism.

So we can surmise that whether nepotism is perceived as positive or negative is influenced by a plethora of cultural, social, geographical, and historical factors, as well as the competence of the person who benefits. Yet, in family businesses, nepotism is often the rule and it is usually accepted by everyone involved. In such cases, nepotism appears to be a problem only when the beneficiary is manifestly unqualified and their actions adversely affect the stakeholders. This paper aims to examine the causes, advantages and disadvantages of nepotism within the business organization context.

## History

Nepotism is defined as favoritism (as in appointment to a job) based on kinship (Merriam Webster). Dictionaries trace the word "nepotism" to the Latin root *nepos*, meaning "nephew" or "grandson." It came into wide use in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to describe the corrupt practice of appointing papal relatives to office, usually illegitimate sons described as nephews.

Nepotism is not a new phenomena, and has been prevalent in business and politics since centuries. However, the meaning has evolved from just hiring a relative to hiring someone who is extremely incompetent.

Adam Bellow differentiates between two kinds of Nepotism: the old and the new. The old nepotism was highly coercive and involved parents' hiring their children outright or pulling strings on their behalf. The new nepotism operates not from the top down but from the bottom up: it is voluntary as it springs from the initiative of children, not the interest of parents. It tends to seem "natural" rather than planned. It essentially involves exploiting the family name, connections, or wealth for personal gain. The method may be different, but the result is much the same. The new nepotism works subtly, creating opportunities for those with connections and excluding those who don't. *"All that is required to profit from this kind of opportunity is a willingness to take advantage of it."* (Bellow)

Bellow believes this new kind of nepotism combines the privileges of birth with the rule of merit in a way that is "much less offensive to democratic sensibilities", since it shows initiative and willingness to work on part of the beneficiary, plus one might get in the door but they will have to prove their worth or face the consequences.

### **How It Functions In Organizations**

Nepotism can manifest in various ways within the organization affecting hiring, promotions, desirable project assignments, workload distribution, preferred shifts or any other openly available opportunity in the workplace (Proctor).

### **Disadvantages**

Nepotism undermines basic democratic principles of justice, fairness, and equality, and lowers employee morale (Ciulla, 159), and adversely affects job satisfaction and organizational commitment, as outsiders in the work group may feel a sense of injustice when they believe that personal connections are needed to be promoted. Nepotism limits a business's ability to build teams authentically, promote top talent, and retain employees overall (Fu), as it establishes a closed group of people who are bound together by intense loyalty to one another and shielded from scrutiny and opinion from the outside world.

Overt nepotism tends to discourage outsiders from seeking employment in the company and stirs up resentment among employees. The primary cause of employee

disappointment in any company is cronyism, favoritism and nepotism (Ozler & Buyukarslan). Businesses inherently require employees to put strangers before their families, putting their public obligations before their private ones.

### **Advantages**

Some large companies prefer hiring relatives of employees because the conduct of one relative is often a good indicator of the conduct of another. Hiring relatives of employees is also a way of building solidarity and commitment to the organization. Employees value reassurance, security and a certain amount of continuity at the top in a highly competitive and volatile environment. They find comfort in a familiar name and face. Additionally, it is quite challenging to devise a framework that motivates managers who aren't owners to put the interests of the organization before their own interests.

"The benefit of nepotism in a family business is that the family member is usually in business for the long haul". (Ciulla 158) They have a strong incentive that motivates them to build and care for a business they can pass on to their future generations.

Certain business families can act as a leadership training ground. People's abilities are "hard wired" to some extent and their socialization plays a huge role in determining their success. Throughout history, family businesses have dominated leadership and employment. Children are either explicitly groomed for their employment at home or develop an interest in a certain field of work as a result of what they learn at home and what their families value (Ciulla 159).

Moreover, Nepotism is based on positive impulses, the desire to transmit knowledge, property, and authority from one generation to the next, which according to Bellow is the bedrock of social existence.

### **Why Does Nepotism Have Pejorative Connotations?**

Confucianism has been criticized, both in the past and in recent times, for giving priority to family members under certain circumstances, even if it contravenes the law. "Confucianism allows consanguineous affection to override public duty of impartiality" (Liu 7). In contrast, Chinese sage Mo Tzu (of the Mohist school) emphasized on the importance of an "all-embracing love" governing all human relationships, making no distinctions between friends, family and humanity at large. "Partiality is to be replaced by

universality”, he said. His ideas drew a lot of criticism from the Confucianists, but they gave us an idea about why impartiality is held in high regard.(Chong)

The reason why nepotism has negative connotations is because we equate morality with impartiality. And nepotism violates that principle, eliciting anger and disgust. Impartiality involves the exclusion of special interests, the equal treatment of all moral agents and the prohibition of discrimination. Most importantly, impartiality is universalizable (Kekes, 296).

The most common criticism that is leveled against morality as impartiality is that it repudiates the family and dismisses the special obligations we hold towards our relations. The concept itself seems to conflict with any kind of loving personal relationship. The whole debate about nepotism boils down to this one question- is it all right to be partial when one's own family is concerned?

James Rachels in his essay 'morality, parents and children' offers a number of pertinent arguments as to why people privilege personal relationships. He starts off with the appeal to intuition. Based on the theory of kin selection, the instinct and natural concern that people have for protecting their own is a product of the evolutionary process. Evolution works through natural selection and the effect of natural selection is to preserve and transmit to future generations genes associated with characteristics that confer advantages in the "struggle for life". Thus, this explains why we have this natural, unescapable tendency to favor our own over others. The second argument, the argument from social roles says that in order to exist and flourish in society, a person has to fill a social role along with the special responsibilities that go with it, which may involve putting some people's interests over others'.

The argument from personal goods is based on the idea that loving relationships are personal goods of great importance. Not only are personal relationships important for having a rich and satisfying life, but also they serve as a source of self esteem. And in order to maintain loving relationships, a person needs to prioritize their needs and interests over others.

The last argument insists that people have this innate need to be treated as special, to be singled out among others and most people cannot flourish unless they see themselves as objects of special care.

Taking cognizance of the aforementioned points, as well as the inherent 'need' of humans to be treated specially, James Rachels proposes a 'partialist theory of morality' that

envisions a social life arranged in a manner such that this 'need' to feel special, which all humans have, is provided equally to all. The benefits of institutions of intimacy, such as friendship, marriage and family should be made available to all persons. Hence, he has more or less conceded that the conception of morality as impartiality may seem plausible only when stated abstractly. However accepting the partialist theory of morality inadvertently incorporates a bias in favor of the ones 'lucky' enough to be born under certain circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

It might seem natural enough, that growing up around a business or a vocation creates an early interest in the field, and a desire to please or emulate one's parents can exert a potent influence. And a parent's natural concern for the well-being of their child might compel him to look out for them in whatever way they can. Seen like this, nepotism might seem harmless but as shown above, it has numerous unpleasant consequences. The central question - do private obligations take precedence over public ones? - has been addressed in the following ways.

According to James Rachels, we are so intricately bound by our private obligations that it is next to impossible to be free of them. Even Adam Bellow, at the end of his treatise on nepotism concedes that "Nepotism may be objectively discriminatory, but given that people are going to practice it anyway, we may as well infuse it with meritocratic principles so that all can benefit."

Historian and cultural critic Christopher Lasch commented that Nepotism lends a necessary 'humanizing element' and balances the excesses of meritocracy.(Bellow) A person who regards themselves as fit to rule by virtue of their merit owes no gratitude or deference to anyone. They have no ethical tie to the mass of ordinary people, and are therefore unresponsive to their needs.

The arguments given by these thinkers, more or less, have reached a consensus that private obligations, under certain circumstances, take precedence over public obligations. However, in a business organization setting, the interests of the stakeholders take precedence over any special obligations we may owe to our relations. Hence, in order to reconcile or find a balance between meritocracy and nepotism one should take into consideration the capability, aptitude and qualifications of the beneficiary before appointing them to a position of responsibility. And hold the patron responsible for their protégé's performance. The onus of training and making them qualified for a specific job

is on the business owner. Putting non-qualified personnel in a decision-making capacity will be detrimental to all stakeholders in the long run.

Lastly, the protege must make an effort to curb the natural resentment of those who did not have the resources they did. They must prove their merit by outstanding dedication to win the approval of their colleagues. As the example of Ratan Tata shows, not all beneficiaries of nepotism are incompetent and honest hard work alongwith dedication can go a long way in redeeming one's public image.

## Bibliography

1. Bellow, Adam. *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003. Print.
2. "Confucianism, Corruption and the Public Ethos ." Philosophical Reflections for Educators. Encyclopedia.com. 28 Mar. 2022 <https://www.encyclopedia.com>
3. Ciulla, Joanne B. "In Praise of Nepotism?" *Business Ethics Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 153–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3857672>.
4. Kukreja, Monika Rawal. "Sushant Singh Rajput's death puts nepotism in spotlight again; industry divided on the debate." *Hindustan Times*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/sushant-singh-rajput-s-death-puts-nepotism-in-spotlight-again-industry-divided-on-the-debate/story-hN2Mkch2CQnwpCcRIENeIO.html>.
5. Sailer, Steve. "Revolutionary Nepotism." *The National Interest*, no. 74, Center for the National Interest, 2003, pp. 149–54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42895672>.
6. Ozler, N., and B.A. Buyukarslan. "THE OVERALL OUTLOOK OF FAVORITISM IN ORGANIZATIONS." *The International Journal of Business and Management*, 2011, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/THE-OVERALL-OUTLOOK-OF-FAVORITISM-IN-ORGANIZATIONS%3A-Ozler-Buyukarslan/147e6f08611b2dd2a76b8978fa4132c58ccf6b63>.
7. Fu, I. Pang. "Favoritism: Ethical Dilemmas Viewed Through Multiple Paradigms." *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership (JVBL)*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-5. [scholar valpo](https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1115&context=jvbl), <https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1115&context=jvbl>.
8. Kekes, John. "Morality and Impartiality." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, [North American Philosophical Publications, University of Illinois Press], 1981, pp. 295–303, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20013927>.



9. Liu, Q.P. "Confucianism and corruption: An analysis of Shun's two actions described by Mencius." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, pp. 1-10.
10. Proctor, Patrick, and Robert H. Smith. "What Is Workplace Nepotism?" *Business.com*, <https://www.business.com/articles/prevent-workplace-nepotism/>.
11. Stamper, Joshua. "Nepotism Definition & Meaning." *Merriam-Webster*, -, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nepotism>. Accessed 21 march 2022.
12. Kota, Hima Bindu. "Nepotism harms business." *Daily Pioneer*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/columnists/nepotism-harms-business.html>.
13. Krishnan, Revathi. "What Ratan Tata did when he was called a 'wrong choice' and JRD accused of nepotism." *ThePrint*, 20 February 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/what-ratan-tata-did-when-he-was-called-a-wrong-choice-and-jrd-accused-of-nepotism/368237/>. Accessed 1 April 2022.
14. Rachels, James. *Morality, Parents and Children*. The Hastings Center, 1980. -, <http://www.jamesrachels.org/CEPA14.pdf>

# UTILITARIANISM AND ITS RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY WAR ETHICS

*Vrinda Goswami*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*The Utilitarian theory, based on the principle of ‘the one that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number’, describes a distinct political-rational understanding of war as the most ethical ideology in the current state of affairs. Even today, it is one of the only moral frameworks that can justify military force or war. In the light of the supposed contemporary (nature of) wars today, such a conceptualization is widely regarded as no longer ethically impactful. This paper, while keeping this idea in mind, aims to show that the notion of the nature of war finds a particular long-impacting expression in the Utilitarian conceptualization of war ethics.*

*The paper will critically comment upon the so-called “Neo-Utilitarian Thesis” and the derived need for a conceptual departure from its classical conceptualization, intending to base the research on how Utility-based ethical practices no longer comply with contemporary needs of the Globally-led world today. The paper will conclude by addressing the need for a more carefully tailored approach in modern-day war-related situations; and proposing a new outlook on the order for a new conceptualization (stating the theoretical and practical consequences), which may prevent regression and facilitate progression and the ethical binds.*

**Keywords:** *Utilitarianism, War ethics, Neo-war, Moral ethics.*

## Introduction

### ***'What is Utilitarianism?'***

Utilitarianism is amongst the most influential and compelling approaches to normative ethics in the historical account of Ethics and Philosophy. This neologism, was given and structured primarily by Jeremy Bentham and later taken up by John Stuart Mill (also known as the classic utilitarians) in the mid-19th century and later tailored by many moralist thinkers like Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Gay, and Hume (Driver. *The history of Utilitarianism*. 2014). Despite the fact that the explanatory position of understanding this theory may vary, the general definition of utilitarianism is held to be in the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good (John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism and economic ideas*). Thus, Utilitarianism is grounded in an ethical theory that distinguishes right from wrong by focusing on its outcomes (the principle of utility). There are considerable ways to spell out this general claim.

The first focal point is that the theory is a form of consequentialism. In the utilitarian view one ought to accelerate the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good. However, given the uncertainty of the future<sup>1</sup> that makes its predicament merely possible, it's non-viable to know whether the consequences of our actions will yield good or bad results. As Utilitarianism is the most reason-based rational approach to right and wrong, it invites quite a few obvious limitations to its direction. Based upon the pre-hinted at, the critical arguments against the theory root themselves from the most novice limitations of Utilitarian rationality and its self-possessed follies. The theory also has concerns about a reckoning for values such as justice and individual rights.

Although, as most of its critics seem to think that utilitarianism is not bad per se, but prone to be misapplied in a self-serving way; I argue that while attempts to re-conceptualize war are breaking with the eternity in the notion of the nature of war, they are not overcoming a particular utility-imbedded mindset since they hold on to their idea of the nature of war. William H. Shaw, in his paper on *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War*, argues that in its careful and most convincing defense of utilitarian thinking about “the moral issues that war occasions, is *misguided*”, as are most of the other common challenges to utilitarian viewpoint about the moral issues war raise and are subjected to a conscious bias towards a privileged lot of the war. (William H. Shaw)

---

<sup>1</sup> *Consequentialism*: The right action is understood simply in terms of the consequences produced by the action.

### **The Implication of Utilitarianism in War Ethics.**

Utilitarianism in the light of War Ethics<sup>2</sup> aims to inscribe to these basic ethical questions posed by war: when, if ever, are we morally justified in the undertaking of war, and if recourse to arms is warranted, how are we permitted to combat the wars we ourselves birthed? In addition, it bouts with the challenge that relativism and realism extend to the ethical discussion of warfare and with the responsibilities of military personnel and the moral ordeal they can face.

Utilitarianism claims that one should act to bring the most pleasure to as many people as possible. I like to refer to this as 'ends justify the means' as I put forth my explanation of the following case, which implies explaining exactly why leaders and conventions have gathered time and time again throughout history to ban weapons from the battlefields especially when it seemed to be the epitome of anything that goes to bring the most pleasure to the maximum number of folks. Utilitarianism in this case can be witnessed and examined as no extra pleasure was brought by using a poison round over a regular round on the person who used it. However, less pleasure overall is brought because of the suffering caused by the poison itself. The First World War saw 'The Hague Conventions'<sup>3</sup> from 1899 to 1907, which banned the use of gas underneath the doctrine which was pulled by articles compiled by the Red Cross, stating the reason to be anything that causes any unnecessary harm to a soldier is to be banned. Utilitarianism comes into play because this unnecessary harm caused by the gas directly extends the assertion that one should bring the most pleasure to as many people as possible. Especially when the gas had the ability to affect both equally; those being targeted and those using it.

Decades later, utilitarianism expands to protect civilians in the Convention from certain conventional weapons. Here weapons such as landmines and napalm of Vietnam fame were banned because indiscriminately the comrade-in-arm soldiers targeted their victim's friends and foes alike and caused unnecessary harm to both soldiers and civilians. As outlined by the Geneva Convention, this practice was later banned as the doctrine of 'bringing the most pleasure to the most people seemed in direct conflict with it because

---

<sup>2</sup> *War Ethics*: The aim of war ethics is to help determine what is right or wrong, both for individuals and countries, and to contribute to arguments on public policy, and ultimately to government and individual effort.

<sup>3</sup> *The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907* were the first multilateral treaties that addressed the conduct of warfare that largely were based on the Lieber Code, which was signed and issued by US President Abraham Lincoln to the Union Forces of the United States on 24 April 1863, during the American Civil War. The Convention aspired to avert the abduction, sale of, or trafficking in children, and it works to ensure that intercountry adoptions are in the best interests of children.

the potential pain brought upon anyone in the vicinity didn't come off to be pleasurable for anyone. Utilitarianism is the reason that warfare is not a realm of anything-goes because trying to bring the most pleasure to the most people sometimes requires strength to be shown by those engaging in war.

### **Nature of Contemporary War/ Neo-war**

The basic understanding of war is derived from our perception of it as either a force-stricken conflict resolution strategy or a way to assert power dominance. Sociologists ordinarily utilize the term to allude to such conflicts only when they are initiated and conducted as per socially recognized norms. They treat war as an institution recognized in custom or law (Joseph. *War Encyclopædia Britannica*).

What is cognized as war depends on the social and historical conditions that affect phenomena comprehensible in one form or another (Bousquet. 2015, 96) (Coker. 2010, 13). This has a few implications with respect to its critical analysis. On the one hand, it turns focus to how actors may create analytical reasons for the actions they clarify meaning to by defining them as war (Bousquet. 2015, 93). On the contrary, it becomes essential to examine the actions considered legitimate that were derived from a conception of war and echo their consequences themselves. Before hovering the concept of war and the nature of war with these insights, it must moreover be recognized that multiple competing concepts of a phenomenon may coexist. This creates an awareness of the power that comes with a temporary predominance of conceptual cognition.

The mere understanding of war arises from factors like legal, sociological, technological, economic, psychological, and political factors. These distinctions indicate the varying focus of interests and the different analytical categories employed by the theoretician. Most of the actual theories, however, are mixed because war is an immensely complicated social phenomenon that cannot be justified or pardoned due to any single factor or via the understating of any singular approach/theory. Therefore, the paper has rather focused primarily on its social, constructive, and ethical factors.

Given the changed narrative of the war in the present time, it's evident that nations no longer are asserting just the hard power over one another but also are majorly inclined towards assigning positions to their soft powers rather diplomatically. This is where I put forth my pre-supposed notion and critique of Utilitarian limitations. As per the new standards of global competition, countries with major power privileges like USA and China are adamant about pursuing acts that are in favor of their progression, but at the

same time neglect the basic notion of global peace. This might be well justified diplomatically, however, the long-term impacts are not much ethical even on their part, taking into account the good and bad aspects of every armed conflict resolution.

### **CASE STUDY: Atomic Bombing at Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

Today, the atomic bombing at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is recalled with *shame*, and people all across the world express their fervent hope that nuclear weapons will never be used again. Many firmly believed that the use of atomic bombs saved American lives by ending the war before a bloodstained American attack on Japan. What is more challenging to consider here is whether it was an unpardonable act in a fully justified war. The atomic bombs that wrecked the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki more than seventy years ago were followed in a matter of days by the all-out surrender of the Japanese empire and military forces, with only the fig leaf of a need—an American assurance not to molest the Emperor. What more could one invite from an *act* of war? The two bombs; each assassinated at least 50,000 people and conceivably as many as 100,000. Countless attempts have been made to estimate the total death toll, estimating not only those who died on the first day and over the following week or two but also the thousands who perished later of cancers that are thought to have been caused by the atomic radiation.

The precise number of deceased can never be known, because whole families—indeed, entire districts—were wiped out by the bombs; because the war had created a floating population of refugees throughout Japan; because certain categories of victims, such as conscript workers from Korea, were excluded from estimates by Japanese authorities; and because as time flew, it became harder to know which deaths had certainly been caused by the bombs. Amongst the many that died, the targets were overwhelmingly civilians, largely the old, the young, and women; and all the belligerents formally took the standing that the killing of civilians violated both the laws of war and common precepts of humanity (Powers. *Was it right?*).

Reported first on August 6th, 1945, Hiroshima was described as a Japanese army base. This furphy could not stand for long. The huge death toll of civil Japanese citizens, fused with the horror of so many deaths by fire, ultimately slew cast a moral shadow over the achievement of ending the war with two bombs.

With respect to our study, the ethical dilemma that we witness here is that of an act-utility i.e. the tangible outcome of the incident was clear enough but it also left long-term marks on the nature of war ethics that were adopted by the USA. Given how the utilitarian view

does not take into account the mental and social impacts of an act in its most callous way, this case study provides a rather apt example for the same. All criteria are problematic and hard to meet here. I'd argue it to be a moral imperative<sup>4</sup>. The number of people extinguished in the two bombings was roughly equivalent to the number of Chinese civilians murdered *per month* by the Japanese army, that too *for eight years*.

Analyses have shown that a person's immune system seriously deteriorates after two years of food rationing. The Japanese were near starvation and their immune systems were severely compromised because of the long-standing war situation. As for the medical aspect that is usually overlooked in situations as such, there was no access to antibiotics. Now, while a fortune of people seemed unharmed, they had sustained minor cuts and bruises from flying debris. These injuries (although not lethal) could easily infect and kill a person. Another factor was the scarcity of clean water as most water sources were contaminated by decaying corpses. The civilians did not have access to drinkable, let alone clean water for weeks after the incident, developed infections, and died. Furthermore, there was a shortage of food and two weeks without food was fatal to a lot of people in an already weakened condition. The military did have access to clean water springs and food repositories, but they did not begin to distribute food to the civilians until two weeks after the attack. Adding to this, the area was plagued by scurvy, cholera, and typhoid, and you can still witness how the collapsed infrastructure adds to the death toll quickly.

With adherence to the factual data, the underlining impact of the bombing did indeed benefit America at the time leaving long-enduring hazardous effects on the people and the city. The outcome not only favored the American diplomats but also crippled Hiroshima and Nagasaki to an extent that the mental, social and physical impact of the event can still be seen evidently. Unfortunately enough, given the current political stances across the world like the Taliban attack on Afghanistan, the USA-Iraq war and a very recent addition to this, the Ukraine and Russia conflict proves to the faculty that we are still standing on similar war grounds as we were nearly seventy years ago. The global war ethics and authorities are yet to deliberate upon the loopholes of such harshly impactful theories and their severe implications on people all across the world.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Moral Imperative*: A moral imperative is an ardent principle that compels the individual to act. It is a type of categorical imperative (i.e., "Thou shalt not steal," for example, is categorical, as distinct from the hypothetical imperatives associated with desire, such as "Do not steal if you want to be popular." For Kant there was only one categorical imperative in the moral realm, which he formulated in two ways), as defined by Immanuel Kant. Kant took the imperative to be a dictate of pure reason, in its practical aspect. Not following the moral law was seen to be self-defeating and thus contrary to reason.

## Ethical dilemmas

Utilitarianism does not interest itself with the nature of the act. That is the discipline of deontology<sup>5</sup>, and to a more secondary extent, of virtue ethics. Any rationed action is sometimes mandatory, sometimes permissible, sometimes even restricted for a utilitarian—based not on the act, but its outcome. For example, the Allies fighting in WWII would almost undoubtedly be permissible from a utilitarian mindset, given their actions are likely to prevent millions of deaths. But, of course, the Allies in WWII were attacked, and like most moral theories, utilitarianism would too, permit them to defend themselves.

What about starting a war? The answer lies in the nature of the outcome. If overruling a peaceful democracy will eventually cause more people to live better lives, then it's justified, according to a utilitarian. This has typically been the main criticism of utilitarianism: it permits any *act per se* (e.g. torture, murder, wars of aggression, war crimes) if the net payoff for human well-being is buoyant. Remark, however, that the theory which explicitly prohibits such casualties (deontology) also sometimes prohibits life-saving actions when doing so means harming an innocent.

That is not to say that deontology is more destructive (or better) than utilitarianism. My point is that all such theories have trade-offs—if they did not, then we would have resolved one by the time. Designating 'just cause' has its independent limitations and rather adverse implications; for example, self-defense is widely recognized, and the UN Charter grants the state a right to defend themselves (Article 51. *UN Charter*). However, other 'just causes' are more challenging to defend. Particularly controversial is humanitarian intervention<sup>6</sup>, even though it is occasionally seen as obligatory, and certainly, the most ethical reason for war. It was for humanitarian motivations that NATO intervened in Kosovo in 1999, but, there are other instances where this has led to disasters (perhaps most controversially the failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide in 1994) (Widdows. 2021).

Although, there have been some noteworthy studies defending the utility theory based not just upon its outcome *per se* but also on how the venture is surfaced to action. Shaw presents his rather classical portrayal of utilitarianism: (*Example of utilitarianism in real life*. 2021) (*What is utilitarianism, ethics things to do in Lincoln, Ne this weekend*. 2022)

---

<sup>5</sup> *Deontology*: Deontology is an ethical theory that says actions are good or bad according to a clear set of rules. The term deontology is derived from the Greek *deon*, "duty," and *logos*, "science." Actions that align with these rules are ethical, while actions that don't aren't.

<sup>6</sup> *Humanitarian Intervention*: The term is the use or threat of military force by a state (or states) across borders with the intent of ending severe and widespread human rights violations in a state which has not given permission for the use of force.



*“Utilitarianism holds, first, that a state of affairs is good or bad to some degree . . . only in virtue of the well-being of the lives of particular individuals . . . Second, utilitarians believe that the good is addictive.” (William H. Shaw)*

In a nutshell, from a utilitarian viewpoint, Shaw takes up a supplementarily consequential and welfarist approach. It is also egalitarian in that it takes everyone's interests into account.

Shaw defends his favorite theory in two stages. In the first, he is presumed to pursue the position of an act-utilitarian<sup>7</sup>. (a) What would an act-utilitarian say about a position where a healthy patient with fully functioning organs is about to be consciously killed to save three others who need transplant surgery? He will say, "Go ahead and do it. There is more utility in saving three lives than in killing one." Utility calculations are not made up just of numbers, he argues. Concerning any action here, we have to undertake the good and bad outcomes of those actions to society, the hospital, other patients, etc., before rendering any judgment. If we do such an analysis, the act-utilitarian is likely to say, "No, let's not do it." With examples like such, Shaw tells us that we cannot rebut utilitarianism by pretending that that theory's defenders are dopey.

But the very fact that any number of rational counterarguments can change the course of the study or alter its consonance to the subjective interpretation of the viewer debunks the purpose of Utilitarianism to be a *Moral Theory*, as we cannot base our collective virtue or ethical standings based on rocky premises.

### **Neo-Utilitarianism**

Neo-utilitarianism provides no response as such to the core foundational question: how the constituent actors—in international relations, territorial states—came to formulate their current identity and the interests that are assumed to go along with it or in favor of it. Likewise, any potential future shift in identity and related interest is beyond the range of this theory. States and the diplomatic systems/organizations simply say about that ‘not only does neo-utilitarianism have no analytical means for negotiating with the generic identities and interests of states-to-states conflicts, it also excludes consideration of how specific identities of specific states shape their interests and, thereby, patterns of international war-connected outcomes.’

---

<sup>7</sup> Act utilitarian: one who does his thinking on a more case-by-case basis

This stands valid even in treatments of the United States—the century's foremost greater power and yet so atypical in its profitable/favorable geopolitical position and internal political and ethnic makeup.

## Conclusion

The character of war is changing fast and the Utilitarian ethics needs to keep pace with that change. These particular principles might as well need revision. But we need to imagine and conclude the fundamental ethical issues like the societal, mental, and environmental impacts of such applied ethical theories.

## Bibliography

Bousquet, Antoine. 2015. "War." In *Concepts in World Politics*, edited by Felix Berenskoetter, 91–

Coker, Christopher. 2010. *Barbarous Philosophers: Reflections on the Nature of War from Heraclitus to Heisenberg*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Daly, Chris. "The Boundaries of Liberalism in a Global Era: A Critique of John Stuart Mill." *OpenSIUC*, [https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp\\_theses/131/](https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses/131/).

Driver, Julia. "The History of Utilitarianism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 22 Sept. 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>.

"Example of Utilitarianism in Real Life." *Example of Utilitarianism in Real Life*, 22 Nov. 2021, <https://agentinyourhand.com/pkv7w/example-of-utilitarianism-in-real-life>.

Frankel, Joseph. "War." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/war>.

"Article 51" *United Nations*. United Nations Charter, <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml>.

Olsthoorn, Peter. "Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War, Written by William H. Shaw." *Brill*, Brill, 19 Apr. 2019, [https://brill.com/abstract/journals/jmp/16/2/article-p251\\_251.xml](https://brill.com/abstract/journals/jmp/16/2/article-p251_251.xml).

Powers, Thomas. "Was It Right?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 26 June 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/07/was-it-right/376364/>.

"Utilitarianism and Economic Ideas." *John Stuart Mill*, 28 Apr. 2016, <https://johnstumill.wordpress.com/utilitarianism/>.

*Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, London, 2016.

"What Is Utilitarianism Ethicsthings to Do in Lincoln, Ne This Weekend." *What Is Utilitarianism Ethics*, 28 March 2022, <https://forqualidade.org/ktknel/what-is-utilitarianism-ethics.html>.

Widdows, Heather. "The Ethics of Warfare: Is It Ever Morally Right to Kill on a Massive Scale." *University of Birmingham*, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/ethics-of-warfare-heather-widdows.aspx>.

# COSMETIC PANOPTICON AND THE “WAR AGAINST OBESITY”: SITUATING GENDERED FATNESS IN BIOPOLITICS

Nanda H.

Lady Shri Ram College for Women

## Abstract

*Exposed to ideals of weight, mass media and the growing culture of neoliberalism since the late 70s, almost every lay person must and will have been indoctrinated into the antagonization of fatness from the very beginning of their lives. This holds true today not only for Anglo-American societies in the West but also, from the universalization of American culture, the rest of the world. Naturally, a question must arise: is there any truth to the argument that fatness is antithetical to health and beauty?*

*This research-driven work presents the argument that **the panopticon surrounding fatness and the population-level “war against obesity” suggest that the gendered, fat body can and must be viewed in the context of biopolitics.** Beginning with a deep dive into an academic understanding of fatness as a social construct and the history of anti-fat bias in Western societies in intersection with gender and race, the paper explores the field of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality while connecting them with gendered fatness with two important concepts, namely that of the cosmetic panopticon and the “war against obesity”.*

**Keywords:** *Fat Studies, Biopolitics, Foucault, Neoliberal Governmentality, Panopticon, Panopticism, Gender Studies.*

## Introduction

Exposed to ideals of weight, mass media and the growing culture of neoliberalism since the late 70s, almost every layperson must and will have been indoctrinated into the antagonization of fatness from the very beginning of their lives. This holds true today not only for Anglo-American societies in the West but also, from the universalization of American culture, for the rest of the world. At the level of the individual, fatness is unhealthy and unattractive; it is a “disease”. At the population level, fatness is viewed as a symptom of an unhealthy society and the antithesis of “ideal” femininity; it is an “epidemic”. Naturally, although suppressed by society at large, a question must arise: is there any truth to the argument that fatness is an “epidemic”? What makes fatness unattractive or un-feminine?

This research-driven work presents the argument that *the panopticon surrounding fatness and the population-level “war against obesity” suggests that the gendered, fat body can and must be viewed in the context of biopolitics*. The paper begins with a deep dive into an academic understanding of fatness as a social construct and the history of anti-fat bias in Western societies in intersection with gender and race. Consequently, it explores the field of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality while connecting them with gendered fatness with two important concepts, namely that of the *cosmetic panopticon* and the *“war against obesity”*.

## Fatness and Anti-fat Bias

A good place to start thinking about anti-fat attitudes would be the definition of fatness itself. It is often argued that fatness is a social construction. While scholars outside of Fat Studies (along with the biomedical community, the press, and most people) use the BMI to designate who is fat and who is not, people involved in the discipline of Fat Studies generally agree that the BMI is a highly outdated method of understanding fatness and that ‘fat’ is a fluid subject position relative to social norms and shared experience (Cooper 1021). Fatness can thus be understood as a common characteristic that people who face a specific form of structural discrimination and oppression have in common. This work uses the word ‘fat’ to refer to fat people in a value-neutral and non-derogatory sense, which is also an act of reclamation of the word from the harmful contexts in which it has previously been used. This work explores anti-fat bias and its history in a brief but effective manner, so as to provide the reader with an adequate idea of the social, cultural and political impacts of being fat.

Ideals of body shape and size have been around for as long as modern humans have<sup>1</sup>. These ideals can and are often associated with cultural values, as well as environmental realities and economic orders. Generally speaking, fat bodies were (and are) admired where food is hard to come by, and thin ones are appreciated in places where food is abundant.

Before the 1880s, a layer of fat was a sign that one could afford food, thus having a better chance of warding off infectious diseases. Sabrina Strings, in the introduction to her “Fearing the Black Body”, reports a vast body of literature from the mid and late nineteenth century wherein excessive slenderness of modern American women was claimed to be unhealthy, lacking physical development and a threat to the nation. For example, an 1888 article from the *Washington Post* with the headline “Are Girls Growing Smaller?” reported, “The girl of the period ranges from 140 pounds down in some cases to 80 pounds or less.... Eighty pounds of femininity is of course, not much... our women will go on getting thinner and thinner until they disappear. It has happened in Boston already (quoted in Strings Introduction).”

However, in the 1880s and 1920s, people started viewing fat as a health risk. This shift is attributed to economic prosperity in America that consequently led to allowing people who were not necessarily elite to afford to be fat, eliminating fatness as a status symbol. The shift was substantiated and encouraged by the European contention of thinness as a sign of moral and intellectual superiority, as well as newly-emerging medical sciences that quantified fatness in terms of calories and ideal weights (Fraser 12). Strings borrows Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social distinctions to illustrate how the elites, using the denial of food and social censorships which bans fatness in favour of thinness, have used thinness as a marker of superiority in the social hierarchy (Epilogue).

The changing ideals of shape, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have also been attributed to racial oppression. Since at least the eighteenth century, literature on the racial sciences has claimed that fatness was “savage” and “black” (ibid., Epilogue). The subject of racialized, gendered fat bodies was being discussed majorly in elite white spaces till as late as the mid-twentieth century, thus serving as a mechanism for white people to degrade and dehumanise the racially Othered body. (ibid., Epilogue).

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the different beauty ideals practised by societies from around the world at different times, refer to Chapter 6 of Nancy Etcoff’s *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*. The evolution of beauty ideals in European and American societies with strong focus on the racial origins of anti-fat bias has been described in detail by Sabrina Strings in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*.

An example from outside the United States shows that anti-fat bias is not always the default. Anthropologist Rebecca Popenoe notes that among a tribe of Nigerian Arabs, fatness was the female beauty ideal and young girls used to be force-fed and “fattened up” for marriage (9). Today, modern Western ideals of slenderness have taken over the world. In the 2001 Miss World beauty contest, Nigeria, who had performed poorly for years, entered a slim and tall young woman named Agbani Darego whose skinny appearance appealed to almost no one in Nigeria, who consequently won (*ibid.*, 18; *Miss World Past Contestants*). Since the occurrence of this event, many young women quickly adopted Western-inspired ideals, more or less universalising American beauty standards.

While fatness is about personal identity, embodiment and agency, it is not a state that is simply experienced and navigated by individuals, but a social construction that is reproduced through social institutions such as education, industry, healthcare, government and the media.<sup>2</sup>

The medicalization of weight led to the popularization of terms like "overweight" and "obese", thus conveying a judgment of clinical and moral nature that a person is above the "correct" weight. "Obesity" was officially declared as an "epidemic" in 1994 by the World Health Organisation (*Obesity and Overweight*). "Obesity" has, therefore, become a sustained focus of physicians, policymakers and various other institutions in the last 30 years. Considering this, it is unsurprising that there is weight-based discrimination both within healthcare and outside it. In 1982, a study of over 400 physicians identified obesity as the fourth most common characteristic that aroused feelings of discomfort among physicians, ranked behind drug addiction, alcoholism and mental illnesses (Klein et al.). This and many other similar cases are proof that there is a significant anti-fat bias in the medical sphere. Negative attitudes and physicians' reluctance leads fat individuals to hesitate in seeking healthcare.

Most bodies we encounter in the media are thin or “normal”-sized. With relative invisibility in popular culture, fat bodies appear in rather specific contexts like in comedy, reality television and very rarely in drama. In news, documentaries and reality television, fatness is focused on as a problem that needs to be solved. Comedy is perhaps the only genre where fat people not only have made notable appearances, but have also thrived (Kyrola). Fat people as comic relief is, in itself, quite problematic; their presence warrants

---

<sup>2</sup> Refer to “Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity” (2001) by Rebecca Puhl and Kelly D. Brownell (in *Obesity Research*, Vol. 9, pages 788-805) for a detailed review of studies that document the discrimination of “overweight” and “obese” individuals.

other characters to make fun of them or adhere to a certain stereotype that makes the main characters “look better”.

In educational circles, it has been observed that fat elementary students are socially excluded and bullied by peers and by teachers. Teachers often perceive fat students as less able academically, physically and socially (Puhl and Brownell 797). In post-secondary settings, fat people are less likely to be given admission, but even if they are, they are likely to encounter harsher assessment, peer exclusion and harassment leading to decreased chances of graduation (ibid., 796).

In different parts of the world, fat people face a disproportionate amount of hindrances in their professional life. With “overweight” employees often assumed to be lacking self-discipline, be lazy, less competent, less conscientious, sloppy, disagreeable, and emotionally unstable, they are subjected to unfair hiring practices, lower wages, denial of promotions and job termination even in cases where fat candidates/employees are better qualified than their colleagues (Leibenstein 132). It is fair, briefly considering various instances of anti-fat bias, that fat people do, in fact, face discrimination.

### **Fatness, Gender and Race**

The perception of fatness as an “issue” cannot be situated outside the context of gender and race. In other words, anti-fat bias necessarily originated in the systems of colonisation and the patriarchy.

Starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural powerhouses of France and England had scholars like Buffon and Le Romain who generated a significant portion of racial scientific theories.<sup>3</sup> According to the Comte de Buffon, for instance, the “plumpness” and “stupidity”<sup>4</sup> of Africans were proof that they were idle due to easy circumstances and abundant natural resources. The association of fatness with gluttonous behaviour and that of thinness with intellectual superiority was thus established.

With the codification of black people as greedy eaters and the High Enlightenment’s popularity of reasoned self-management, food intake shifted from a personal act to a political act. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, large and robust feminine forms were highly prized, but in the light of new racial theories, an attempt to rationalise even aesthetic values led to a rigorous reconsideration of the plump feminine form

---

<sup>3</sup> Different theories of the racial sciences (and their racist and fat phobic implications) have been described in the third chapter of Sabrina Strings’ *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*.

<sup>4</sup> Strings (ch.3) writes that Buffon described black Africans as “tall, plump... but simple and stupid.”



(Strings ch. 3). This racial discourse of fatness was beyond doubt as racist as it was sexist, since the association of fatness with people of colour was used as an example to promote slenderness among and police the bodies of elite white women (*ibid.*, Epilogue).

In the early 1900s, charts for ideal weights<sup>5</sup> were first prepared by health insurance companies in an effort to decrease risks of mortality (Brumberg). These “medico-actuarial” health charts were prepared with data collected from a demographic that was entirely composed of middle-class white men and the help of physicians who were employed by insurance companies to produce reports that link obesity with mortality (*ibid.*, 230). Since black people tend to have higher BMIs than white people (one of the reasons for this being greater bone mineral density or BMD (Wagner and Heyward pp. 1399-1400)), black women specifically were targeted as having significant cases of “extreme obesity” (Flegal et al. 1725).

Fat women today experience significantly more prejudice and discrimination than thinner women and men of any weight do in several domains, such as healthcare, employment, education, the media and romantic relationships. A study by Jasper and Klassen that asked students to rate hypothetical job applicants who varied by body type, reported that students were significantly less likely to be interested in working with a fat person than a straight-sized person, with male students being reportedly far less interested to work with a fat woman when, on the other hand, no such general difference was noted on interest in working with a fat man (pp. 563-66). When it comes to education, a 2007 study with data from Add Health found that “obese” adolescent girls were less likely to get admitted into college than their “non-obese” counterparts, while “obesity” was not related to boys' rates of college matriculation (Fikkan and Rothblum pp. 575-792). The likelihood of being in heterosexual romantic relationships decreases by 6-7% for each one-point increase in BMI, according to a 2005 study; however, a heavier body weight is less detrimental to the dating and sexual relationships of men (*ibid.*, 581).

These are just a few of the countless examples that prove the invariable link between gender and fatness. Chrisler situates this overlap between gender and fatness in the sexualization and objectification of women, as well as expectations that have been set for women by patriarchal standards (pp. 608-16). For instance, gender-role socialisation shapes women to care more about health than men do, given their role as the “nurturer” (*ibid.*, 610). A key takeaway must be, therefore, that there is a fair amount of evidence and theory that suggest the link between fatness, gender and race.

---

<sup>5</sup> “For Researchers on Obesity” by Komaroff elaborates on how these tables evolved.

### **Fatness in the Context of Neoliberal Biopolitics**

Having built a groundwork on fatness and its relation with gender and race, let us now approach the crux of the argument at hand by exploring fatness in the biopolitical context.

Foucault understands life as both an object and effect of political strategies and technologies, existing not outside political processes but in the very centre of it. This is where biopolitics as an area of study was born: it refers to a historical transformation that began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whereby the right to life and death that was owned by monarchies was replaced by a new form of power that aimed to develop, optimise, order and secure life ("Biopolitics and State Regulation of Human Life"). This "biopower", as Foucault refers to it, has evolved in two basic forms: (i) an "anatomo-politics" of the human body characterised by discipline, optimization of capabilities and docility, and (ii) a "bio-politics" of the population which places emphasis on the species body and biological processes that focuses on propagation, births and mortality, life expectancy and more (*The History of Sexuality* 139). Biopolitics thus refers to the strategic use of information to make bodies and populations amenable to technologies of control, governing them through mundane administration and surveillance and adjusting them to "normal" standards (Ong 1243).

Gendered fatness as a subject concerning biopolitics can be located both in the anatomical and biological levels. This paper substantiates the argument for the relevance of fatness in both of these levels by invoking two concepts: that of the cosmetic panopticon and the medical gaze.

The "panopticon" or the "inspection house" was a prison model that was put forward by Jeremy Bentham in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Characterised by a circular building with the cells arranged across the outer wall and an inspection tower at the very centre, this intricate model offered complete surveillance of each prison cell from the inspection tower at all times which, according to Bentham, would motivate prisoners to modify their behaviour, submit to imprisonment and work hard in order to avoid punishment (UCL). As Foucault mentions in his *Discipline and Punish* (201), "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." Foucault borrows Bentham's idea of the panopticon to introduce a wider social phenomenon, which he refers to as panopticism.

Panopticism is the surveillance and control of people due to which they are compelled to alter their behaviour because they feel like they are being constantly observed and judged (Giovanelli and Ostertag 289). This would explain, for instance, why we feel the need to present ourselves a certain way to other people. Panopticism extends to the personal sphere as we unconsciously engage in self-surveillance. This surveillance is all-pervasive, especially through the advent of mass media, wherein the audience are subjected to depictions of certain “ways” of living that are deemed acceptable. It becomes important to note that the media panopticon is fundamentally interwoven with patriarchal beliefs. Women are thus taught to view and judge themselves and other women through the eyes of men and the criteria set by patriarchal standards (ibid., 289).

The panopticon created by mass media especially operates on the level of the body, thus bringing forth the whole notion of a “cosmetic panopticon” which pressures women, despite their attempts to reject social expectations, to engage in the creation of an “ideal” feminine body-subject, the attainment of which then becomes a priority (ibid., 290). Women are constantly reminded of what it means to be “feminine”, which sets up a mechanism wherein women are able (and expected) to evaluate themselves on how well they meet those standards. The resultant surveillance of their own bodies leads women to become their own jailers.

The expectation that women must be smaller than men and take up little space makes fat women the antithesis of femininity. This is precisely where fatness fits into the notion of a cosmetic panopticon. Let us, for example, look back at the presence of gendered fat bodies in the media. As noted earlier, fat representation in mass media is relatively non-existent. Fat women are even more underrepresented than fat men, with only 1.7% of prime-time television hours featuring fat women in the United States (ibid., 294). Moreover, when fat women *do* get screen time in mass media, they are usually cast as an antithesis to the thinner “main” characters who mostly make derogatory remarks about them for comic relief, indicating that fatness is an undesirable quality in women (Fikkan and Rothblum 584). This symbolic annihilation of fat women in mass media is consistent with the larger pattern of the cosmetic panopticon wherein women are expected to fit into a certain mould, the rejection of which could lead them to be a subject of jokes, abuse or even institutional discrimination. With the system of surveillance in place, there is thus a self-disciplining of gendered fat bodies in order to be smaller and take up less space. Self-control is practised through means such as dieting or restricted food intake, exercise, mannerisms and movement.

The medical frame of fatness also contributes to self-control through dieting and exercise. "Obesity" understands fatness as a medical *problem*, thus *problematizing* fatness. When fatness is understood through the medical frame, it is claimed that excess amounts of weight or fat is a medical problem and that it must be shed through medical means. This view is commonly by medical journals and healthcare professionals while encountering fatness. Women in particular are more likely to (1) be aware of their body's dimensions and (2) be able to recall how much they weighed throughout the years or at each milestone (Harjunen 37). This disciplinary form of biopower aims at making their subjects internalise these standards and, by disciplining themselves to meet these standards, become more docile to governance.

Similar to the medical frame of fatness is the public health crisis frame of fatness which claims that increasing weights of the general population is a public health crisis and that BMI ought to be reduced at the population level. This is where we can situate the biopolitics of fatness at the species level. With the World Health Organization's declaration of the "obesity epidemic" in 1994 and the popular media's reflection of this alarm at obesity since the late 1980s with the usage of words such as "time bomb" and "war", the belief that larger body sizes are an immediate social threat and health hazard is maintained (Ingraham 166). Harjunen considers the discourse of the "obesity epidemic" as a unique political phenomenon which itself has spread like an epidemic, making fatness a global biopolitical concern (43). Under the guise of promoting health, this discourse has treated gendered fatness with global scrutiny and normalised the social control of fatness.

To sum up what has been elaborated so far, gendered fat bodies are uniquely affected by biopolitical structures. Through social phenomena like the cosmetic panopticon and the medicalization of fatness, fat women are expected to discipline themselves in order to adhere to the "ideal" feminine body-subject and stay within "ideal" weights by maintaining the "correct" Body Mass Index. At the level of the population, the medicalization of fatness has manifested the declaration of an "obesity epidemic", thus moving entire countries to focus on and counter the "war against obesity".

Neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality offer an insightful theoretical lens to view the uniquely complex biopolitical nature of gendered fatness. According to Harvey (2), neoliberalism "is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." Having emerged as a response to the global capitalist crises in the 1970s (Guthman 190), the neoliberal

economic policy is characterised by an emphasis on free markets, the private sector, market-friendly policies and minimal roles for the public sector (Harjunen 23). Contemporary socio-political discourse often views neoliberalism as fundamentally anti-egalitarian, being that it is seen as the main reason for a widening income gap, moving away from welfare state policies and the exploitation of “third-world countries” (Brown 2, 3). Foucault, having developed the concept of governmentality<sup>6</sup>, consequently established a genealogy of “neoliberal governmentality” which is a style of governing that takes its cues from and flows with the market (Harjunen 24).

It is in tandem with the emergence of neoliberalism in the late-1970s Anglo-American context that a particular neoliberal governmentality specific to the body began becoming visible (ibid., 27). There was a growing emphasis on the appearance of the body and the self-governing practices of body maintenance as well as the rising belief that one is responsible for their health and one must be health-conscious (Crawford 365). The kind of body that was desirable was described and dictated through mass media as physically fit, good-looking and youthful; this “look” was (and still is) marketed by the capitalist consumerist culture of neoliberalism as something that can be purchased (Harjunen 28).

What neoliberalism offers is not only the commodification of everything, but also creating needs that were previously non-existent (Guthman 191). This can be observed particularly in the context of fast-food: it offers a “double fixing” of capitalism by both exploiting the labour force and providing an outlet for extra or surplus food (ibid., 191). At the same time, neoliberalism, by emphasising on the appearance of the body and endorsing health as a personal responsibility, offers solutions for the weight-gaining effects of surplus food by making the “solution” to “obesity” purchasable. The neoliberal culture has commodified both eating and weight-reduction methods such as dieting, exercise programs and plastic surgeries. As Guthman (192) describes it, “the material contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are not only resolved in the sphere of surplus distribution, but also in bodies.” In other words, the borderline-bulimic tendency of neoliberal capitalism directly affects the gendered fat body.

## Conclusion

It is having considered the vast impact that the neoliberal culture has on bodies that Harjunen (48) writes: “fatness and the fat body have come to represent the

---

<sup>6</sup> Governmentality is an integral element of Foucauldian thought that was developed in the 1970s through his lectures at the Collège de France. It refers to a regulatory form of power that is exerted through a wide array of measures.

contradictions of neoliberal times – they represent excess, surplus, and wastefulness, not just in bodies, but in society too. In a neoliberal culture which treats people as economic units, bodies as another kind of commodity, health as an expense, and being healthy as a chore, fatness is metonymically connected to everything that is detested in the neoliberal discourse.” Having briefly glanced at the cosmetic panopticon, the notion of the “war against obesity” and neoliberal governmentality, gendered fatness cannot simply be defined by its medical, public health crisis and moral frames; it is certainly biopolitical and a key to understanding American neoliberal biopolitics, an epidemic in its own right that has taken today’s world by storm.

### Works Cited

- “Biopolitics and State Regulation of Human Life.” *Obo*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756223/obo-9780199756223-0170.xml>. Accessed 9 Feb. 2022.
- Brown, Wendy. “Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” *Theory & Event*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020>.
- Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*. 9.10.2000 edition, Vintage, 2000.
- Chrisler, Joan C. “‘Why Can’t You Control Yourself?’ Fat Should Be a Feminist Issue.” *Sex Roles*, vol. 66, no. 9, May 2012, pp. 608–16. *Springer Link*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0095-1>.
- Cooper, Charlotte. “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field.” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 4, no. 12, Jan. 2010, pp. 1020–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00336.x>.
- Crawford, Robert. “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life.” *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 10, no. 3, July 1980, pp. 365–88. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.2190/3H2H-3XJN-3KAY-G9NY>.
- Fikkan, Janna L., and Esther D. Rothblum. “Is Fat a Feminist Issue? Exploring the Gendered Nature of Weight Bias.” *Sex Roles*, vol. 66, no. 9, May 2012, pp. 575–92. *Springer Link*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0022-5>.

Flegal, Katherine M., et al. "Prevalence and Trends in Obesity among US Adults, 1999-2000." *JAMA*, vol. 288, no. 14, Oct. 2002, pp. 1723-27. *PubMed*, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.288.14.1723>.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Reprint edition, Vintage, 1995.

---. *The History of Sexuality: 1: The Will to Knowledge*. Penguin Classics, 2020.

Fraser, Laura. "The Inner Corset; A Brief History of Fat in the United States." *The Fat Studies Reader*, by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press, 2009.

Giovanelli, Dina, and Stephen Ostertag. "Controlling the Body Media: Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline." *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum et al., NYU Press, 2009. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10929>.

Guthman, Julie. "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies." *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum et al., NYU Press, 2009. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10929>.

Harjunen, Hannele. *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body*. Routledge, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315583976>.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Ingraham, Natalie. "Fat Studies and Public Health." *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, edited by Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor, Routledge, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049401>.

Jasper, Cynthia R., and Michael L. Klassen. "Perceptions of Salespersons' Appearance and Evaluation of Job Performance." *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 71, no. 2, Oct. 1990, pp. 563-66. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1990.71.2.563>.

Klein, David, et al. "Patient Characteristics That Elicit Negative Responses from Family Physicians." *The Journal of Family Practice*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1982, pp. 881-88.

Komaroff, Marina. "For Researchers on Obesity: Historical Review of Extra Body Weight Definitions." *Journal of Obesity*, vol. 2016, 2016, p. 2460285. *PubMed*, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/2460285>.

Kyrola, Katariina. "Fat in the Media." *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, by Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor, Routledge, 2021.

Leibenstein, Stephanie von. "Fatness, Discrimination and Law: An International Perspective." *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, by Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor, Routledge, 2021.

*Miss World Past Contestants*. <https://www.missworld.com/#/contestants/3028>.

Obesity and Overweight.  
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>.  
Accessed 4 Nov. 2021.

Ong, Aihwa. "Making the Biopolitical Subject: Cambodian Immigrants, Refugee Medicine and Cultural Citizenship in California." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 40, no. 9, May 1995, pp. 1243–57. *ScienceDirect*, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)00230-Q](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)00230-Q).

Popenoe, Rebecca. "Ideal." *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, by Don Kulick and Anne Meneley, Tarcher/Penguin, 2005.

Puhl, Rebecca, and Kelly D. Brownell. "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity." *Obesity Research*, vol. 9, no. 12, 2001, pp. 788–805. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/oby.2001.108>.

Strings, Sabrina. "Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia." *Fearing the Black Body*, New York University Press, 2019. *www.degruyter.com*, <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479891788>.

UCL. "The Panopticon." *Bentham Project*, 17 May 2018, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/who-was-jeremy-bentham/panopticon>.

Wagner, Dale R., and Vivian H. Heyward. "Measures of Body Composition in Blacks and Whites: A Comparative Review." *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, vol. 71, no. 6, June 2000, pp. 1392–402. *Silverchair*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/71.6.1392>.



# FAN CULTURE — THE SIGIL OF LITERATURE AND MODERN SOCIETY

## *Communitarianism and Hedonism as a driving force for fan interaction*

Shreya Juyal and Vanshika Yadav

Hansraj College, Delhi University

### **Abstract**

*Patronage and fandoms have always been an intrinsic part of human art forms, and literature has remained to be a driving force behind various forms of media consumption. This paper aims to explore literature and its evolution in a post-industrialist, post-internet, globalised era, and the influence of Communitarianism and Hedonism on the art form as a subsequent result. While literature and literacy have historically been limited to the upper class that gatekept their social standing and yielded exceptional exploitation over other social and economical classes, this paper explores the climbing literacy rates specifically in a Western context during the 19-20th century Europe, rapid globalization, the boom of the internet, as well as trickling down of the purchasing power to the masses as contributing factors towards the evolution of distinct literary participation from the people in a literate society in the form of fandoms, fan-events like Comic Conventions, and most importantly, fan-fiction as a new genre of literature.*

*The paper explores the influence of Communitarianism with its intrinsic need of an individual to be a part of a community and how that community shapes the individual, Hedonism which advocates for maximizing pleasure, and how this has influenced literature, the pillar of all other forms of media. In a modern society characterised by technology and globalisation, literature has continued to evolve, giving birth to participatory communities and subcultures built on the ideas of hedonism and communitarianism. These subcultures wield immense influence in modern media cultures, allowing the inception of influential fan practises that continue to define society.*

*This natural step towards the assimilation of different cultures around the globe also resulted in a greater demand for progressive principles of diversity, inclusion and representation of all social groups which will also be explored in this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Communitarianism, Hedonism, Patronage, Fan culture, Fan fiction, Fan conventions, Literature, Media cultures, Participatory cultures, Fandoms.*

## **Introduction**

Human beings love stories. We love to listen to stories and we love to tell them. Civilizations have been telling and recording our stories from the moment we knew to draw on cave walls. It is part of our nature— an intrinsic need to communicate and explore. Literary knowledge endows an understanding and an empathy in the reader, even for someone who is much separated by time and distance. In a modern society characterised by technology and globalisation, literature has continued to evolve, giving birth to participatory communities and subcultures built on the ideas of hedonism and communitarianism. These subcultures wield immense influence in modern media cultures, allowing the inception of influential fan practises that continue to define society.

## **Patronage And Literature**

Samuel Johnson, the father of modern dictionary, defined a patron as "one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help."

In a more rudimentary explanation, patrons or sponsors are people who provide financial or other kinds of support to the concerned party. Great artists like Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Shakespeare have relied on such compensations. Patronage was so institutionalised that it was the only way to gain social and upward mobility in Florentine life. This cycle of monetisation left artists as mediums that could immortalise or spread their patron's political or personal ambitions.

When we look back at the West before the 19th century, the presence of a feudal system and with that, the extraordinary control of aristocracy over society was rampant. This class of people possessed extraordinary economical and social influence. Royalty and aristocracy were the two primary social groups that funded art.

Literature, a subsection of art, is one of the most influential ways to shape society, whether it be through *The Republic* by Plato or by *The Division of Labour* by Durkheim. Still, its omnipresence does not make it stoic in the face of market demand. The economic disparity in Europe resulted in niche groups getting access to literary arts with an even narrower number of people being able to enter the patron circle. The majority of the population that lacked such affordability seldom got represented in the written world. Even if people could hypothetically access these writings, they did not have the time or

comprehensibility to understand them. And since they could not afford such arts, it wasn't directed towards them either.

Fanfiction still existed, as people have always had an innate ambition or desire to maximise their pleasure (hedonism) but it was limited to specific circles and never really became a universal thing. For instance, the aristocracy and the common working-class never really came to bond over a single thing. The elites might have discussed “Una Candida Cerva” in their literacy circles, but it remained exclusive to them only. However, the existence of these circles, however limited, show the initial inklings of Communitarianism, as people formed and were influenced by their literary/ artistic groups, but this phenomena never took off in the way it has today in the way of fandoms.

All of this was to change with the advent of economical parity in the West, spearheaded by political movements in the 19th century. The onset of industrialization as well as the long term effects of colonialism brought great wealth to nations like France and England. The monarchical setup of states also fizzled down to give birth to selective democracies. Monetary power started trickling down to the masses. Literature got a larger reader base and so did fan fiction and fandom in return, since the concept of patrons also spread out to include a larger number of people. The mid 19th century witnessed funding come from publicly supported systems like mass audiences, museums, theatres, etc.

Today, patronage has diversified from a niche circle of exemplary elite figures to the masses as the disintegration of the monarchy to democracy in the West eventually accelerated purchasing power to the masses. The rise of consumers has thus divided the role of patrons from single figures to the interest of the public and we consistently see them manifest through crowdfunding, websites like Patreon, and via the traditional method of commissioned work by artists. Thus, the gradual rising participation of the masses as consumers of literature has directly coincided with the steep increase of fan culture today, however, this literary phenomena, is heavily dependent on various ideologies of philosophy, namely Communitarianism and Hedonism. But what are they?

### **Communitarianism And Hedonism In Fan Cultures**

Humans are social beings, and their need to gauge their identity and sense of self from their community has always been omnipresent. Communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasises and highlights the relationship between the individual and their community. It believes that an individual's social identity and personality are not only affected but also

moulded by their community relationships and interactions. Though commonly an individual's community would mean their familial relationships, when speaking in the context of fan culture, this community would extend to include a community of people with a shared interest.

Amitai Etzioni, one of the leaders of the American communitarian movement, defined a community as having two salient characteristics– a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one or chain-like individual relationships); and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short, a particular culture. These communities shape, and ought to shape our moral and political judgments and we have a strong obligation to support and nourish the particular communities that provide meaning for our lives, without which we'd be disoriented, deeply lonely, and incapable of informed moral and political judgement. With the onset of globalisation and the internet, these communities gained the ability to extend beyond geographical limitations, allowing virtual communities to closely affect an individual's life.

Jeremy Bentham, a prominent philosopher of the hedonistic ideology, describes hedonism as “nature placing mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters– pain, and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do ” in his book *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

Hedonism as a theory is ancient, dating back to the 4th century BCE, and was coined by Aristippe of Cyrene, known as the father of hedonism. It is the theory of pleasure; encompassing multiple theories in its wide ideology, hedonism believes that human behaviour is based on inherent desires, and a need to live in a manner that maximises pleasure and reduces pain. The ideology at the time, limited to simply rationalising all human behaviour as driven by pleasure, received wide criticism, with many philosophers shunning it as a vain theory. Coupled with the rise of Christianity at the time, it resulted in the idea dying out with Aristippe. However, many years later, Epicurus, the father of Epicureanism, rebirthed the hedonistic ideology by redefining what “pleasure” meant. For Aristippe, pleasure was a state of ecstasy or excitement, something that would encompass something as simple as eating your favourite meal, or reading a good book. Modern hedonism has been further classified into Ethical and Psychological Hedonism, with each sect having its share of criticism. However, in this paper, we will delve into Aristippe's

understanding of hedonism, and understand how this ideology, coupled with communitarianism, is the crux of fan culture and its various spheres, especially fanfiction.

A fandom or a fan culture is a community characterised by a shared feeling of camaraderie and empathy amongst people with similar interests, also known as fans. Fans of an artist or a component of popular culture have existed across time. As mentioned earlier, patronage has existed since the dawn of the upper class. As discussed previously, various artists and disciplines have enjoyed the support of noble or ecclesiastical patrons. The relationship between an artist and their patron cannot be characterised as fan culture as the patron acted more as a sponsor, and used the patronage to endorse their political ambitions, social positions, and prestige. However, the patrons were “fans”- in the sense that they exhibited strong interest and admiration of the artist’s work. And while this patronage was limited to the wealthy upper class in a pre-industrialised society, after industrialization and the emergence of an educated middle class, a new group of admirers of artists emerged. The middle class, educated and larger than the upper class, provided a new form of symbolic patronage- a fandom or fan culture.

As industrialisation and globalisation started to affect all classes of society, it allowed media to be consumed at a large scale by people around the world. With the arrival of the internet and its impact on media, fan culture became an easily accessible participatory society, expanding to encompass community members undefined by political and geographical boundaries.

According to Christian Fuchs, “participatory culture is a term that is often used for designating the involvement of users, audiences, consumers and fans in the creation of culture and content.” It is a culture where members feel socially connected, believing that their contributions matter in the community, and act as not just consumers, but also producers. As a participatory culture, fandoms are also spaces where community members share their creations and artistic expressions. These expressions take shape in many forms in literary fandoms- fanart, cosplay, filk music, etc. However, in this paper, we will explore the participatory actions of fan fiction and literary conventions, and how they are a testament to the presence of hedonism and utilitarianism in fan subcultures.

### **Fandoms As A Participatory Subculture**

Though the birth of fan culture is attributed to the Star Trek fandom in the 1960s, fans of the famous literary detective, Sherlock Holmes, are commonly thought to be the first

modern fandom. When Arthur Conan Doyle decided to “kill off” the character in 1893 to focus on other writings instead, fans of the beloved detective expressed an outpour of grief and mourning. Distressed readers took to writing letters to *Strand Magazine* where Doyle’s short stories were published, and over 20,000 readers cancelled their subscription to the magazine. But most importantly, fans started to write and publish unofficial stories, now known as fan fiction, which were based in the fictional universe of *Sherlock Holmes* and dated back to 1897, until Doyle was eventually forced to resurrect the character in 1903 and continue writing more.

This is one of the earliest recorded incidents of hedonism in literary culture, where fans rallied together to influence and change an aspect of literature in an attempt to minimise the pain (Sherlock’s death), and maximise pleasure (Sherlock’s resurrection and Doyle’s unwilling obligation to write more stories).

Thus, Appeticus’ ideology of hedonism forms the basis of fan fiction.

### **But, What Is Fan Fiction?**

Fanfiction is literature produced, consumed, and disseminated by fans. Even though authors like Homer and Shakespeare have used already existing characters in their works before, the term was introduced after the adoption of the copyright system, and was popularised by the Star Trek fandom. Fans publish these unofficial texts using copyrighted characters, concepts, and worlds already featured in existing intellectual property and turn them into something new. These texts are often hefty and precise, going into the details of the cinematic universes they are borrowing from and is a form of fan labour. Despite requiring excessive amounts of creative energy and labour to produce, and no effective compensation for the same, fan fiction has remained to be an integral part of fan culture, interconnecting all forms of popular media and culture with literature.

According to cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, fans creatively and selectively reappropriate elements of mass culture as a means of forming and projecting their own identities and desires. They want to extend a piece of fiction to explore things that are implied but not fully developed, like a relationship, technology, a plotline, etc., or want to project themselves in these cinematic universes. With the internet, spaces to produce and access these unofficial stories were made accessible, leading to the creation of exclusive spaces for fan literature, like Fanfiction.net and Archiveofourown.org.

Fanfiction serves as a sandbox for the fans to play in- to explore sexualities of the characters that might not have been made official by the author, to “kill off” characters that they do not like, or even to change the ending if they were unsatisfied with it, as the fans of Arthur Conan Doyle did with Sherlock Holmes’ death. Today, fan fiction has grown immensely around the globe, with every internet fandom engaging in literary activity, with these unofficial stories gaining worldwide repute and being considered as a work of fiction on their own accord.

A popular example of such a modern-day fanfiction is E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, originally written as fan fiction for the *Twilight* series of books and movies by Stephanie Meyer.

Today, fanfiction is a global avenue for fans to explore their desires and maximise the pleasure that they get from a work of fiction, and is thus, entrenched in hedonistic ideology. Since fan fiction has universal popularity, people naturally bond over these collective fantasies as a fandom which can be attributed to the philosophy of Communitarianism.

Fan convention (also known as con or fan meeting), a term that predates 1942 is an event in which fans of a particular topic gather together. They participate and hold programs and other events, and meet experts, famous personalities, and each other, often incorporating commercial activity in the events. Conventions are where fans unite. These are spaces for fans to express themselves and their interests with members of the same fan culture. The modern concept of a fan convention dates back to the late 1930s, with various gatherings of science-fiction fans in Philadelphia and New York, which attracted a few dozen attendees. But the 1939 World's Fair in New York saw the first World Science Fiction Convention, an annual event now known as Worldcon. Through the years, this phenomenon has grown immensely. The San Diego Comic-Con started as a small meeting of 300 people in 1971 and grew to fit into the San Diego Convention Center in the 1990s. Soon after, Hollywood moved into San Diego Comic-Con to promote their films directly to fans. As a result, San Diego Comic-Con has grown to become the largest fan gathering in the United States with over 130,000 attendees. It's also expanded beyond comic books and focuses on all aspects of pop culture.

Similarly, BookCon is an annual fan convention established in 2014 in New York City. Taking the name format from other fan conventions such as Comic-Con, BookCon was established to combine pop culture and the book industry, and is attended by many authors, celebrities and publishing professionals. These conventions bank on the

Communitarian ideology of fandoms, where the sense of belonging and identity is so strong that people from around the world travel to partake in these fan spaces. These conventions further support the fans' artistic expressions, with fans often dressing up in cosplay, where participants called cosplayers wear costumes and fashion accessories to represent a specific character. These fandoms are communities, and so fans gauge their identity and sense of self from spaces, and their social identity and personality are not only affected but also moulded by these community relationships and interactions in the form of fan conventions.

The Western literary trends have all but monetized this mass participation, with a lot of fictional genres in the West now covering universal themes by featuring dysfunctional societies, from the onset of the apocalypse, end of the world, or even another world war. This provides a large market around the world as people get a sense of belongingness. On top of that, the West which already harbours a disproportionate amount of resources, like US citizens being 5% of the world's population and still using 24% of the world's energy, spearheads this marketing strategy with its soft power influence all over the world. In turn, popular media and literature are beginning to get more diversified to remain socially and economically relevant.

Literature and media cultures are inseparably linked together. The former can sometimes not only set precedence for the latter but also discuss discourse with more depth and content. Furthermore, media is more accessible and offers wide-scale dissemination of themes and information. As globalisation and economic parity affect all art forms around the globe, fans are influencing progressive changes in the representation of repressed groups in both literature and popular media. From Rupi Kaur's commercial success to Marvel's Black Panther being one of the biggest superhero cinema hits, the stagnancy between certain classes remaining in privileged positions is fast dissolving, all thanks to the participatory culture of fandoms and its inclusion of people from all walks of life, which has also helped literature remain relevant in an evolving technological and electronic social world.

### Works Cited

A Brief History of Patronage,  
[http://galileo.rice.edu/lib/student\\_work/florence96/jessdave/patronage.html](http://galileo.rice.edu/lib/student_work/florence96/jessdave/patronage.html).

Www2.le.ac.uk. 2022. A Participatory Culture — University of Leicester. [online]



Avineri, S. and de-Shalit, Avner. (1992) *Communitarianism and Individualism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bentham, J., 2012. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Dover Publications.

Cuccinello, Hayley C. "Fifty Shades of Green: How Fanfiction Went from Dirty Little Secret to Money Machine." *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, 10 Dec. 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hayleycuccinello/2017/02/10/fifty-shades-of-green-how-fanfiction-went-from-dirty-little-secret-to-money-machine/?sh=18d251d1264c>.

Haenfler. *sites.grinnell.edu*. 2022. *Fandom and Participatory Culture – Subcultures and Sociology*. [online]

Ethics Unwrapped. 2022. *Hedonism - Ethics Unwrapped*. [online]

Nast, C., 2022. *Scott Brown on Sherlock Holmes, Obsessed Nerds, and Fan Fiction*. [online]

"Population and Energy Consumption." *Washington State University*, <https://public.wsu.edu/~mreed/380American%20Consumption.htm>.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, et al. *The Poems of Shelley*. Longman, 2000.

# REFLECTIONS OF REALITY: FLEABAG, PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE AND BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL IN CINEMATIC ART

*Mannat Ahmed Khan*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*Cinematic art is deeply immersed in philosophy with the physical and imaginary walls of film firmly rooted in the discipline. This paper aims at shedding light on the exercise of breaking the Fourth Wall in cinema and expatiating the idea through the British show Fleabag. It is compared to and explained by Plato's Allegory of the Cave to highlight the impact it has on our understanding of reality both inside and outside the realm of film. The argument this research functions on is that **breaking the fourth wall in cinematic art can lead to a pleasantly aching connection to true reality through a comfortable conversation with the reflections of reality present in art. This is proved in the backdrop of Plato's allegory of the cave through Fleabag.***

**Keywords:** *Cinematic art, Fourth Wall, Fleabag, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, reflections of reality, true reality.*

## **Introduction**

Art as an element of our experience as beings consists of certain stakeholders: the artist who makes the art, the art itself, and the audience. Apart from interpretation, representation and expression, art encapsulates a constructed reality. It is a version of reality that is either eerily similar to our reality or vastly different from what we have the ability to experience. But, in all of these scenarios, according to French Philosopher Denis Diderot, art and its audience is separated by an imaginary wall. This imaginary wall is a tool of separation that allows an artist to produce art independent of anything outside its own universe. It is used to exclusively view the artwork as its own being. What happens when you break this wall? Does it lead to the artwork losing its meaning as art? Does it lead to art being too close to reality? Or does the breaking of the constructed reflection of reality lead to the enlightenment of the audience?

This paper presents an analysis of the highly acclaimed British show, *Fleabag* and what its breaking the fourth wall elucidates within the context of the theory provided by Plato's Allegory of the Cave. It explores the scenes where the fourth wall is broken and the reasoning behind it with respect to the concepts and ideas that are dealt with in said scenarios. The research aims at examining Plato's Allegory of the Cave and its resonance and connotations in the concept of breaking the fourth wall. To Plato, everything we experience is a flawed reflection of ideal reality and art, in its widely believed definition, imitates reality. Therefore, breaking the fourth wall leaves the audience with a distorted idea of reality or an extremely raw and unfiltered version of the human experience.

## **Cinematic art and Plato's Allegory of the Cave**

In his early works, Plato presented to us the Allegory of the Cave or the Myth of the Cave as his explanation of the education of the soul towards enlightenment in an elaborate set-up that seeks to explain the way in which individuals acquire knowledge (Daniyar 1). In this setup, Plato says that individuals present inside the said cave are imprisoned and chained so that they can only see forward in one direction. A fire is lit behind them, allowing them only to view the mere shadows of the outside world. These prisoners lack the ability to fully experience the true reality of things.

According to Plato, these prisoners represent the human race. He believes that we are shackled by our inability to understand and experience reality for what it really is. Our existence imprisons and shelters us from the unadulterated version of the world. Socrates

explains a situation where the prisoners are freed and allowed to see the world outside this cave. They realise that the true reality is far superior to the shadows they've seen till now. As they return to this cave, they are in shock<sup>1</sup>. The same cycle follows every time a prisoner leaves and returns to the cave. The discomfort and ache caused by the constant switch from shadows to the true reality confine the prisoner to abiding by what they know and in what they find solace. The allegory of the cave is an impression of what we see as living in reality, yet we discover the true reality once we are free. Instead, we would like to continue living in our prisons and shun away any person who tries to free us by enlightening us. Therefore, we can acknowledge that regardless of the sum of knowledge of the reality we endeavour to be free, we will always be victims of our inadequacies, living in prisons of our own creations (ibid 2).

We see Plato's idea of the reflections of reality play out in many arenas, and one that ties closely to it is art. Artistic endeavours are of many avatars, usually imitating reality, contradicting it, manipulating it or escaping it. These interpretations reflect reality by either holding a mirror up to it or shattering that same mirror.

Cinematic art is a widely favoured and loved form of conveying stories in a purely artistic and visual configuration. According to Jean-Louis Baudry, the uncanny resemblance between Plato's cave and the cinematic condition is mainly psychoanalytical- "it aims to pose the problem of the exact nature of this transcendental and transhistorical desire to produce an apparatus capable of fabricating an impression of reality". We can outline this similarity between cinematic art and Plato's cave, where a film is projected from the back of a cinema hall, and the reflection of reality is presented to the prisoners through shadows produced by the fire. Drawing these connections, it can be said that, similar to the toil faced by the prisoners to break away from the reflections of reality, an audience viewing the cinematic apparatus to convey art can experience a certain sense of imprisonment to the universe or this reflection constructed by the filmmaker. However, the cave is a place from which all should desire to escape, yet a modern movie theatre is a place we frequently elect to escape to (Deneen 69). It then compels us to ponder whether cinema is in any way similar to Plato's Cave.

Plato says that there is no distinction between the reflections and the reality of these prisons; it is one and the same. Similarly, we often note viewers are so well immersed in the movie's fiction that they momentarily believe in the realness of it. It is this blurred line that emerges as the common denominator in Plato's Cave and cinematic art, the lack of

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more in depth understanding of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, refer to the original work *Plato. The Allegory of the Cave*. Republic

distinction between what is a reflection of reality and what is the unfiltered reality. It then opens a possibility of a galaxy full of mechanisms to unshackle the audience and prove that Plato's theory can oust an individual from the confinements of a reflection of reality when utilised in cinematic art.

### **Breaking the Fourth Wall**

The reflections of reality contrived in cinematic or initially theatrical art consist of four walls representing the walls surrounding a stage. The three walls are physical and visible to the eye, while the fourth is a figment of our imagination that separates the audience from the art, demarcating the point after which the art enjoys its own universe. The accessories of that art maintain this fourth wall. This imaginary wall found its name and recognition in the theatres of France when French playwright Moliere coined the term "The Fourth Wall" for it in the 1600s.

However, this wall can be broken, bringing about a mechanism called "Breaking the Fourth wall". This idea spoke about the fact that the interaction between art, and its viewer is highly individualistic and thus is a dialogue of monologue spoken in many languages, which makes it catatonic. When this art breaks the fourth wall, it becomes aware and cognizant of its existence within the frame of its creation while understanding what lies outside it as well. This can be seen as an art having its own consciousness so as to establish another way to interact with its viewer. (The Breaking of the Fourth Wall, Dadaism and Manir Mrittik)

Breaking the fourth wall is a typically unconventional form of interacting with an audience in the realm of cinema. It is often assumed that this destroys the illusion of the story world in narrative filmmaking, and in acknowledging the technology behind the art, in the case of movies, distances us from fiction (Brown 10). Usually seen as a negative consequence of this medium, in the context of breaking away from reflections of reality; however, this mechanism can be an advantageous and favourable technique. When the conveyer of the art within the frame chooses to address the audience directly, they establish a certain sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge of the art. This awareness is a highly effective path to transforming art into a more credible reflection of reality. The artistically required unshackling of humans from the cinema's fiction and the intersection of artistic liberation and human liberation transforms the said cinematic art from a plot to a raw journey of art and imagination. Films in which this form of what may be called 'direct address' is present can be said to intensify our relationship with the fiction (ibid 10).

In the context of breaking the fourth wall, this tussle with the construction of reality is

often criticised for laying too much emphasis on the tool of capturing the art. What gets ignored in these debates is that, in an attempt to view this reflection of reality from an outsider's point of view, the artist intelligently transforms the audience into a character of the story as well. This is possible due to the fact that the rest of the characters are not oblivious to the camera, and neither is the character breaking the fourth wall fully cognizant of it. There is no camera in their world (ibid 11).

Experiential understanding and direct address can equip a cinematic art to pull away a witness of the art from the contrived reflections of reality and push them closer to intricately and multi-dimensionally viewing cinema. A piece of art that can sustain this balance while creating a nuanced and playfully complicated experience for the audience has the ability to encompass the purpose of breaking the fourth wall and the philosophy of Plato's cave.

### **Fleabag**

Fleabag is a British comedy-drama television series that follows the life of our protagonist, namely Fleabag, as she navigates everyday tragedies of life and their unwelcome consequences. It is a witty and tumultuous show infused with dry and pleasantly inappropriate humour. This sarcastic yet subtle conglomerate of episodes follows a general theme of the intricacies of basic human emotions triggered by unlimited complicated enablers and, of course, the constant usage of breaking the fourth wall by the lead.

The show created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who plays Fleabag, is not extravagant or flamboyant but keeps the audience on its toes via the constant eye contact, direct address, and confession of her true feelings by the protagonist. Often, when the fourth wall is not broken strategically, it disrupts the story's pace, which leads to viewers being "out" of it instead of being fully immersed (Rivera). However, in Fleabag, we observe an intelligent balance between maintaining the fictitious nature of the story while pulling the viewers into the mind of the character to either disrupt the emotionally complex scenes through humour or share exclusive insight with the audience in order to establish an untouched and unfiltered transaction of emotions. The balance is stricken due to the intimate recognition of the audience as a character themselves. Fleabag does not refer to the audience as plural but as "you". In this manner, we become part of the fiction and become integral actors in the carrying on of the story.

The blurred line that Plato talks about finds a sniff of clarity in the said show. According to

Fleabag, her interaction with us is a reflection of her reality, which she uses to cope with her painful and often intolerable true reality. We observe her escaping her reality to find comfort in her honest interactions with us, similar to how a prisoner wishes to escape the harshness of the outside world by returning to the cave. Fleabag always performs for the camera to distract both herself and the audience from her misery (Wright).

### Reflections of 'You'

In the show, there is an aura of ambiguity around the idea of the self. The first ambiguous arc is the vagueness around who the main character is. Throughout the show, Fleabag's real name remains a mystery to us due to the fact that no one addresses her by her name and just by "*her*" or "*you*". Picking up on the show's general theme, her identity is kept a secret to signify Fleabag's internal tussle and conflict with understanding who she really is and what she stands for. Therefore, in her true reality, which we are viewing from inside the constructed reflection of her reality, people don't know her as an individual but as Fleabag- a dirty, shabby, and messy person by definition. It is a reflection of how she often views herself underneath the humour and the wit. We derive insight, and voyeuristic pleasure from her humour and pain, though she'd be quick to deny that it hurts (D. Killian).

The second ambiguous element is the vagueness around who the main lead talks to when she breaks the fourth wall. Fleabag refers to the audience simply as "*you*". This is a generalised and impersonal form of address in the sense that who we are as a specific individual seems to matter less than the fact that we are present and observing. Thus, the address exceeds the frame of the narrative universe and establishes a sense of intimacy (Wong).

Still, we can examine the possibility that Fleabag's '*you*' is herself. It is her inner voice that rings continuously inside your brain<sup>2</sup>. When Fleabag talks to *you*, her surroundings or the movement of the people around her do not stop. This indicates that most of the conversations she has with *you* are dialogues that she is having with herself inside her head. The entire passage above can be read as a self-address, and its narrative situation would hardly be affected if we were to replace every second-person pronoun with a first-person equivalent: "*you* know that feeling, when a guy *you* like sends *you* a text[...] asking if he can come and find *you*" can be read as "*I* know that feeling when a guy *I* like sends *me* a text [...] asking if he can come and find *me*..."(ibid)

---

<sup>2</sup> To understand the second-person narrative in television by viewing the relationship between Fleabag and the camera as one between a fictional narrator and the "implied" audience, refer to Wong, "Distancing Effect in Fleabag."

In both these ideas of self, we notice a clear distinction between Fleabag's true reality and reflection of it that is conveyed in the show from her point of view. These reflections serve as a projection of her emotions or a coping mechanism for her to deal with her true reality. When she breaks the fourth wall, it is an attempt to allow Fleabag to connect with her true reality via the aid provided to her by her reflection, in this case, it being the audience or *you*. Parallel to this, for the audience, this breaking of the fourth wall serves as a refreshing disconnect from the fiction, enough to allow us to experience the cinematic art unshackled.

### **Reflections of Love**

Fleabag as a show covers many areas of deep human connection and emotion, dealing with existentialism, political beliefs, morality and love. The main lead goes through many romantic experiences, whether meaningless or meaningful and has a strong opinion on each. Barring her frivolous suitors in the first season, there is one romantic endeavour that sticks with her, which occurs in the second season of the show. This experience holds great importance in our analysis of breaking the fourth wall.

In the first episode of the second season, we get introduced to the *priest*. As a new character, he was introduced as someone who would facilitate the wedding of Fleabag's father and her stepmother. Over time, Fleabag and the priest get closer and share moments of emotional intimacy. Usually, in a situation like this where Fleabag was attracted to someone, it would very quickly lead to her sleeping with them and establishing a purely physical relationship. But given that the priest, devoted to his religion, was chained to the rules of celibacy, she couldn't transform their friendship into that.

In their getting to know each other, the priest surprisingly "catches" Fleabag talking to *you*. He is the only one that sees her breaking the Fourth Wall and that takes Fleabag by surprise. She turns defensive and is baffled by the fact that he could connect to this vulnerable and honest outlet that was just hers until this point. This "bubble" that we were living in with Fleabag is abruptly burst by the *priest*. This is a testament to how intimate and secret our relationship with Fleabag was all this time and how the viewer now also needs to reserve this extra space to let the priest in (Pastoor).

This stands to be a critical point in breaking the fourth wall in the show. The unique ability of the *priest* to notice her talking to "someone" can be interpreted as evidence that out of everyone in Fleabag's life, he is the only one who recognises this inner voice or dialogue



that she has constructed for herself. It can be seen as proof that he is the only one who truly listens to her and allows her to be vulnerable and honest. It can be said that the deeper connection Fleabag shares with *you*, she also shares with the *priest*, which is scary to her.

The fear and the shock that Fleabag experiences when the priest *gains* the ability to look inside her reflection runs parallel to the fear and disruption that Plato says will be experienced when the prisoners inside the cave are exposed to the true reality.

### **Reflections of Loss**

Fleabag's journey is embedded in the eternal grief she experiences due to the death of her mother, her best friend, and eventually, the loss of a person she loves. It is evident that her actions and her thoughts are profusely influenced by the loss that she has experienced. Her story of loss is essential because it can be assumed that her vulnerable relationship with *you* began only after these extreme events in her life transpired. The reasoning behind the main lead in the show breaking the fourth wall can be traced back to her relationship with grief and sadness.

"I don't know what to do with it, with all the love I have for her. I don't know where to put it now." "I'll take it. No, I'm serious, it sounds lovely." (Fleabag, Season 2, Episode 4, 14:31-14:51). This conversation happens between Fleabag and her best friend at her mother's funeral. It showcases that behind her usual display of strength, she is broken and needs to put her love into someone's hands. Boo, her best friend, offers to take it, but she passes away soon after as well. In this tumultuous journey of Fleabag's love being passed around from one loved one to another, it gets lost somewhere. We can then highlight the possibility that her aim at breaking the fourth wall is to give her love to someone. Find someone she can be vulnerable and honest with. Therefore, she finds us, the audience, in the form of *you*. Love, as espoused by the characters of the show, is a concrete thing that almost exists outside of two people and can last after someone has gone ( S. Alpers).

Fleabag constructs this reflection to imagine a reality where she has someone to hand her love to. It is, in fact, a pathway to connect or somewhat cope with the absence of love in her reality. Her reflection of reality allows her to go on in life without a safeguard for her love. This can serve as probable reasoning for her defensiveness toward the *priest* unmasking her reflection because it meant that he was somewhat capable of preserving her love, mirroring Plato's cave where the prisoners find solace in the cave's comfort where they escape after facing the scorching and loveless reality. Fleabag shows us that

despite being all the things she is, which are viewed as edgy or different, she is human too.

## Conclusion

In this analysis, we widely explored the concepts of reflections of reality, love, self, and grief and how these can be beautifully incorporated into cinematic art. Plato's cave serves as the epitome of the worst-case scenario for human existence and the knowledge they possess of their reality. However, this arrangement of the cave and the prisoners can be seen and interpreted in cinema to invoke emotions and enlightening thoughts amongst the audience. Breaking the fourth wall in cinema can execute this thought-provoking process. The reflections we observed in Fleabag's journey were all tools and gimmicks to allow her to be comfortable with the experience she is compelled to confront in her reality. The intimacy and connection established when art breaks the Fourth Wall runs parallel to the prisoners in Plato's cave attempting to view the unfiltered reality of the world. We find them finding solace back in fiction or, as Plato says, the reflections of reality to tolerate the occasional confrontation with its negative omniscience. The characters that break the fourth wall, as we analysed, follow this same pattern imitating reality. Thus, we can apply this probable idea in circles of debate that when cinematic art breaks the fourth wall, it allows the audience viewing it and the character who breaks it to establish a comfortable connection with the true reality via the path of interacting with the reflections of it.

## Works cited

Alpers, Mira S. "To 'Fleabag,' With Grief" *The Harvard Crimson*, March 9, 2021, Accessed March 19, 2022. [www.thecrimson.com/column/personal-essays/article/2021/3/9/to-fleabag-with-grief-personal-essay/](http://www.thecrimson.com/column/personal-essays/article/2021/3/9/to-fleabag-with-grief-personal-essay/).

Baudry, Jean-Louis. "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema." *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, 1986, pp. 148 – 182. [canvas.uw.edu/files/78460440/download?download\\_frd=1&verifier=TrJul.sfiYgx6nxSjZewScAmyzn784NshOlcNCFxv](http://canvas.uw.edu/files/78460440/download?download_frd=1&verifier=TrJul.sfiYgx6nxSjZewScAmyzn784NshOlcNCFxv)

Bo, Ruochen. "From Plato's Cave To Edward Yang's Cinema: An Examination of Filmic Language and its Noetic Potential" University of New Mexico Digital Repository, April 2018, pp. 1-6 [digitalrepository.unm.edu/fll\\_etds/129](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/fll_etds/129)

Brown, Tom. *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press 2012, pp. 10-11, Accessed March 18, 2022. [edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-breaking-the-fourth-wall.html](http://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-breaking-the-fourth-wall.html).

Deneen, Patrick J. "Escaping the Cave: On Film, Reality, and Civic Education. Introduction." *Perspectives on Political Science* 31, no. 2, January 1, 2002, pp. 69-70. [doi.org/10.1080/10457090209604073](https://doi.org/10.1080/10457090209604073).

Dreama, Cleaver D. "Breaking the Fourth Wall: A Study of Gender Fluidity Using Immersive Storytelling as a Medium for Evoking Empathy" *Graduate School of the Ohio State University* 2018. [etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_etd/send\\_file/send?accession=osu153173611895785&disposition=inline](http://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=osu153173611895785&disposition=inline)

*Fleabag*, written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, directed by Harry Bradbeer and Tim Kirkby, Two Brother's Pictures, 2016- 2019

Killian, Kyle D. "Painful Perfection: Review of the Tragicomic Series *Fleabag*" *Psychology Today*. June 14, 2019, Accessed March 19, 2022. [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/intersections/201906/painful-perfection-review-the-tragicomic-series-fleabag](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/intersections/201906/painful-perfection-review-the-tragicomic-series-fleabag).

Kurmanbek, Daniar. "Allegory of the Cave," *American University at Central Asia*, September 2020. [www.researchgate.net/publication/344070430\\_Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_Cave\\_Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_Cave](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/344070430_Allegory_of_the_Cave_Allegory_of_the_Cave)

Livingston, Paisley. *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199570171.001.0001/acprof-9780199570171](http://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199570171.001.0001/acprof-9780199570171)

MasterClass Staff. "Breaking the Fourth Wall: Definition and Examples in Film" *MasterClass*, June 2021, Accessed March 18, 2022. [www.masterclass.com/articles/how-breaking-the-fourth-wall-works-in-film-and-tv](http://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-breaking-the-fourth-wall-works-in-film-and-tv).

Pastoor, Idhuna. "How *Fleabag* Uses the Fourth Wall to Create Intimacy," *Diggit Magazine*.

October 7, 2020. [www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/fleabag-fourth-wall-intimacy](http://www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/fleabag-fourth-wall-intimacy).

Plato. *The Allegory of the Cave, Republic VII*, P, Shorey trans. from *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Hamilton & Cairns Random House 1963, pp. 742-756. [yale.learningu.org/download/ca778ca3-7e93-4fa6-a03f-471e6f15028f/H2664\\_Allegory%20of%20the%20Cave%20.pdf](http://yale.learningu.org/download/ca778ca3-7e93-4fa6-a03f-471e6f15028f/H2664_Allegory%20of%20the%20Cave%20.pdf)

Plato. *The Allegory of the Cave*, Republic, c. 375 BC.

Rivera, Robin. "Pros & Cons of Breaking the Fourth Wall." *WriteOnSisters.Com*, November 12, 2014. [writeonsisters.com/writing-craft/pros-cons-breaking-fourth-wall/](http://writeonsisters.com/writing-craft/pros-cons-breaking-fourth-wall/)

Season 2, Episode 4, *Fleabag*, written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, directed by Harry Bradbeer and Tim Kirkby, Two Brother's Pictures, 2016- 2019.

Stichter, Anne. "The Role of Breaking the Fourth Wall in Audience Ego Identification." *Aletheia* 1, no. 2 (2016). [doi.org/10.21081/ax011](https://doi.org/10.21081/ax011).

"The Breaking of the Fourth Wall, Dadaism and Manir Mrittik" *Aakar Prakar*, November 15, 2018. [www.akarprakar.com/the-breaking-of-the-fourth-wall-dadaism-and-manir-mrittik/](http://www.akarprakar.com/the-breaking-of-the-fourth-wall-dadaism-and-manir-mrittik/)

Wong, Denis. "Distancing Effect in Fleabag" *Alluvium*, December 16, 2019. [www.alluvium-journal.org/2019/12/16/distancing-affect-in-fleabag/](http://www.alluvium-journal.org/2019/12/16/distancing-affect-in-fleabag/)

Wright, Catherine. "'Fleabag': Phoebe Waller-Bridge Says This Is The Real Reason Her Character Talks Into Camera," *ShowBiz CheatSheet*, November 21, 2019. [www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/fleabag-phoebe-waller-bridge-says-this-is-the-real-reason-her-character-talks-into-camera.html/](http://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/fleabag-phoebe-waller-bridge-says-this-is-the-real-reason-her-character-talks-into-camera.html/).

## UTOPIA - A GOAL?

*Vaishnavi Nimma*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

### **Abstract**

*Utopian thought has played its part in constructing and rewriting human history. It's been explored as a genre in both film and literature and whether we are aware of it or not, it forms an important element of our thought. This paper establishes the role of utopian thought processes in our life and questions its necessity through an analysis of various literary works and theories of social thought.*

**Keywords:** *Utopia, Literature, Lyman Tower Sargent, Utopian Thinking, Dystopia, Feminist Utopia.*

## **Introduction**

The idea of Utopia has never been foreign. While utopian tendencies have not been acknowledged as a part of our active thought, it cannot be denied that they form an important part of our civilization. Humans have always looked to the future to find better alternatives to their present.

A plethora of science fiction movies and literature feed off of this habit and provide us with glamorous modern cities where people are perfect and illiteracy and strife are unheard of. Utopian literature also serves as an important commentary on possible political or economic issues of the present. By presenting a version of the future which the creator deems most ideal, one draws attention to the social evils that are characteristic of their present-day context.

Even with the utopian genre put aside, religious scriptures, myths and superstitions are not free from mentions of an ideal world. Both Eden and the city of Ayodhya are examples of utopia. While the former does not necessarily talk of a human community (since there are only two people) it presents a perfect environment of coexistence between nature and man that for many is the epitome of purity. Religious utopias are similar in that they are almost always achieved with no human effort. One might bring up 'Heaven' as a possible contradiction, and argue that one's actions or merit gathered will determine whether one can access heaven or not, and thus does require conscious human effort and thought. But death seems an unlikely and unsure path to utopia. Consider, furthermore, the practice of festivals. For a brief period of time, everyone, regardless of who, shares communal spirit, food, dance and song. An environment is invoked where everyone can partake in a utopian-like illusion.

Most of our endeavours are actively spent in the pursuit of improvement, with some higher image of perfection in mind. Lyman Sargent defines this tendency to dream of a better life despite being reasonably content as a utopian impulse. Utopia as a concept is not as removed from our life as we might assume. It plays an active part in shaping our thought and, thus, our activity, and is found consistently in history. Therefore, extensive study of Utopia is justified and it continues to attract scholars as an area of research.

## **What Are Utopias?**

The word Utopia was first used as the title for Thomas More's 1516 book. It originates from the Greek words 'ou' and 'topos' meaning 'no place' and was used to describe a fictional

nation in More's book. Utopia in the context of his book, was a supposedly perfect island country, where property, work and production are communal. It was More's work that gave utopian literature its beginning and served as a model for various other pieces of the genre.

Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopianism broadly as social dreaming.<sup>1</sup> He refers to the element of human nature that encourages us to dream of better alternatives; these alternatives may be constituted of radical changes or may be familiar in foundation. Suvin further classifies it as a community where public institutions and relationships are given "to a more perfect principle than to the author's community" (qtd. in Sargent, 6)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, a utopia must be considered better to some extent than the author's community.

Different aspects of society find dominion while describing utopias through literature at different periods of time. For instance, the rules governing the original 'Utopia' in More's work would be considered too harsh in the twenty-first century<sup>3</sup>, yet it might make better context in the author's world. So, while a utopia cannot be classified as good or bad at all times to all readers, the contemporary reader must be able to understand it as good to a certain extent.

Considering all the differences, we can conclude that to a wide extent Utopia refers to a non-existent place (a 'non place') that the creator intends as a better alternative to their present circumstances. But the creator's intention alone cannot be the defining characteristic of a utopia, for in many cases we cannot definitely know what the author's intention is.

### **Utopia As Necessary**

Several thinkers relate utopian thinking as necessary towards positive change, it is considered by them to be both a natural and necessary constituent for progress towards the future.

Karl Mannheim, for instance, regards utopian thinking as necessary to bring about social change. He makes a distinction between ideology and utopia as modes of thought. Ideology is characteristic of the dominant classes and tends to protect the dominant

---

<sup>1</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces Of Utopianism", *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, (Penn State University Press, 1994), pp.3

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.6

<sup>3</sup> One such rule that might be considered harsh in contemporary times, is how the city 'Utopia' has no doors that can be locked in any of its houses. This is done to prevent idleness or gossip. The loss of private space provides constant surveillance.

social order. Utopian thought, however, belongs to the oppressed classes; it seeks to destroy and transform aspects of the society it finds problematic. Utopian thinking is essential to social change and bringing in new theories of thought, ideological thinking however seeks to maintain current threads of thought and is in that context outdated.

Another thinker, Ernst Bloch, very strongly affirms the possibility of Utopia and marks its 'inseparable' connection with 'hope'. Hope is the projection of that which holds the possibility of occurring, and Utopia is the actualization of hope that stems from conscious thought, what Bloch calls "day-dreams". Utopia is a 'real possibility' and it is at the end of Utopia, we find Freedom: freedom from pain, hunger, discrimination etc. Further, the possibility of Utopia depends on the choices we make and suggests that we must choose and act in order to achieve it. It encourages us to decide between alternatives and decisions we make to improve ourselves. Freedom lies in this process of being able to choose and act.<sup>4</sup>

Dystopia and Utopia have been used in conjunction several times in the utopian genre. The word dystopia itself finds its origin in relation to utopia; dys-utopia or 'bad non place' was meant to depict the opposite of utopia, i.e. a non-existent place that the creator understands as a worse alternative than the present circumstances. This distinction is often used to draw comparisons in utopian literature. For instance, in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the narrative provides a debate between More and Hythloday about the societal and living conditions of London in the sixteenth century and the 'improved' characteristics of 'Utopia'.<sup>5</sup> In this context, London can draw a parallel with dystopia or heading towards a dystopian future whereas, Utopia represents a perfect world.

More attempts to provide a criticism of his present-day circumstances with the help of the concepts of utopia and dystopia; a practice that has been noted in several other works that fall under the genre. Utopian literature, and the concepts of Utopia and Dystopia, serve as an important means to comment on and criticise elements of the society that are found problematic.

This is particularly true in the context of feminist utopian literature of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Writers of these texts have been constantly aware of the dangers that were implied by the existing patriarchal system and brought attention to it through the dystopian cities they

---

<sup>4</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces Of Utopianism", *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, (Penn State University Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>5</sup> 'Utopia' is the name of the island country in Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516). Here Utopia refers to a supposedly perfect country.

<sup>6</sup> Marge Piercy's works 'Women on The Edge of Time' (1976) and 'He, She and It' (1991) are both prominent examples.



mention in their works, whereas their utopian worlds were improved and highlighted what the author considered positive changes from their present context. Tom Moylan proposes that such texts can be classified as “critical utopias”. While they are effective critiques their main purpose is not to provide an actual blueprint.<sup>7</sup>

### **Utopias To Be Avoided**

Despite its hopeful projection, Utopia has been met with doubt and scepticism by many. While some call it fanciful and impossible, others view it as dangerous and misleading to the point of unreasonableness if not harmfulness.

Given that Nazi Germany and Stanlist Russia have committed extensive killing in order to fulfil their economic, ideological and social goals as according to their ideologies, it could be argued that they were aiming for utopian perfection. The resulting deaths were a trade off with what was believed to be extended perfection and the absence of social evils like poverty, hunger and illiteracy. The stakes lie between sacrificing the lives of one generation and the consistent well-being of the rest of the generations. It is not surprising that many would find this exchange problematic.

The above was only one serious ethical problem Utopia proposes among others. In this section we will explore the negative interpretation of Utopia and how it is self-defeating in itself.

### Self-Defeating

If Utopia is a blueprint of the best possible alternative to a present scenario, its biggest flaw is that it cannot be objectively proven to be so. Many constituents of the utopian plan contain elements that are related to human affairs - political, social and religious among others. These are areas that fall outside the scientific domain and cannot be classified easily as right or wrong and better or worse. How far can we rationally determine whether a particular institution advocated by a utopian blueprint is better than another?<sup>8</sup>

Even if a particular blueprint is finalised, it is hard for it to be the most appropriate alternative consistently over time. Ethical values governing social institutions and theories are always actively under discussion and subject to change. Attitudes concerning gender and race are very different from what they were a hundred years ago and will most likely

---

<sup>7</sup> Keith Booker, “Women on The Edge of A Genre: The Feminist Dystopias Of Marge Piercy”, *Science Fiction Studies*, Nov. 1994, Vol.21, No.3, p 338-339

<sup>8</sup>Karl Popper, “Utopia and Violence.” *World Affairs*, vol. 149, no. 1, World Affairs Institute, 1986, pp. 3–9

change a hundred years later. However, a fixed blueprint with definite political and social aims cannot be changed to adapt to these growing trends and our continuously changing political ideals. Hence, our process of working towards a Utopia is a tiring and never-ending process.

Thus, making a blueprint for an ideal world situated in the future cannot prove beyond reasonable doubt that it is in fact the best alternative or that it will remain so.

#### It Will Inevitably Lead to Violence

This argument has much to do with the belief that utopianism is definitely connected with violence, suppression and, ultimately, totalitarianism. One of its strongest opponents is Karl R. Popper, Popper argues that violence must inevitably be used to suppress both opposition and criticism. It is inevitable for opposing views to arise or for criticisms to occur; these must be either dissuaded through rational argument or erased through violence. It is because of its self-defeating nature that violence has found its place as a part of the utopian process. Karl R. Popper says that a utopia cannot be possible “without a strong centralised government of the few which will likely become a dictatorship.” (Qtd in Sargent, 24)<sup>9</sup>

Anti-utopianism sprung up in connection to World War 1 and World War 2, where the world had witnessed humanity's scope for destruction. Germany, Russia and Italy all had respective political ideologies where violence and widespread 'ethnic cleansing' were only one part of achieving these political goals. People are already aware of the effects of living through a tyrannical state and are rightly hesitant to be involved in another social theory that holds scope for becoming violent.

Even among Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Stanlist Russia there are those people, (however small compared to the rest) who do view the cost of life as acceptable in exchange for stability in the state. In Ursula Le Guin's "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas"<sup>10</sup>, we encounter a similar ethical problem. Omelas is a town where everyone is happy, the author does not explain their governing rules in detail, but we get the sense that there are not many problems if not none. Yet, all the happiness and the wellbeing of the residents of Omelas depends on the continuous unhappiness of a small child. If by

---

<sup>9</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism", *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, (Penn State University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. (New York, Harpers, 1975)

bringing the child out of its misery we were to bring down the lives of everyone else, would the child be an appropriate price to pay.

The logic behind those who accept the deaths behind utopian plans runs along the same thread, except the numbers are exponentially bigger. Even if the number of people who were damaged could be limited to one, would it make the utopian ideal any more appropriate?

Karl R. Popper argues that we must recognise all social activity as a matter of transience and not any one as transient and the other as final. Additionally, he emphasises the need to focus on the more immediate effects of our actions on present and future generations. In his own words, “we should never attempt to measure anybody’s misery against someone else’s happiness.”<sup>11</sup>

### Perfect People

A perfect place more often than not requires perfect people. People who are equally intelligent, capable and contributing are presupposed as residents while constructing a utopian state or systems are deployed so as to have people reach similar levels of intelligence and health and ensure that they contribute equally to its functioning through rules. More's *Utopia*<sup>12</sup> for instance, punishes lethargy by the law and allows no space for a person to be idle when others are working.

However, Utopias might not make adequate space for people who do not meet their levels of mental and physical capability. Louis Lowry's “The Giver” is a story about a community that has no essence of hunger, pain or even discrimination of any sort. The older generation and babies who are not as physically strong as the rest of the age group are “released”, i.e, they are put to death. It is the community's way of making a society where its people are “equal”.

‘New Harmony’ was an attempt at a utopian state where its members were accomplished in their own respective fields and, thus, met the standard of ‘perfect persons’. It was originally a religious town meant to house members of the Harmonists away from religious persecution after becoming self-sufficient, but was sold completely to Robert Owen in 1825. Owen, along with his partner, William Maclure, set out to start out a utopian experiment. They started recruiting members from all over the world from different

---

<sup>11</sup> Karl Popper, “Utopia and Violence.” *World Affairs*, vol. 149, no. 1, World Affairs Institute, 1986, 8

<sup>12</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516.

backgrounds. All of them were talented individuals; yet, the State was eventually dissolved because of constant disagreements about ideas on division of work, communal property etc. Their own sense of freedom and individuality eventually beat their agreed system of communalism.

Here, despite meeting the pre required elements of suitable people, the Utopia could not sustain itself.

### Is A Feminist Utopia Possible?

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, talks about the contradictory nature of choosing a subject in the area of feminism. Defining the “feminist subject” upon a pre-determined meaning might make it exclusionary to a number of people. To be more specific, she suggests that “the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms in states a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of a new identity”<sup>13</sup>

In similar terms, defining the feminist ideals in a utopian state while providing a better alternative context than the present might also serve as a restrictive definition for new identities or institutions that seek to be established in the future. By drawing out Utopian and Dystopian narratives, we seek to establish binary distinctions between what is right and wrong, what is feminist and not or what are acceptable or recognized identities or not while unintentionally leaving out those who do not fit into either category.

Feminist ideals are not something that can be definitely defined at a point of time, since we cannot at any particular time correctly define its subject either. Perhaps leaving both the feminist aim and subject incomplete gives it more power and opens it to be more inclusive.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay was to highlight the difficulties in trying to hold a ‘utopian’ social theory as a guide towards our life. From the 20th century the word ‘utopia’ has been seen negatively; infamous social experiments have been understood as attempts to achieve utopian states. They’ve been understood as leading to the loss of innumerable lives, as wicked ruptures in the history of humanity that have opened up the world to man’s insensitivity and capacity for violence.

---

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble” (1990) pp. 20-21

What we must consider is whether it is truly possible to construct a social theory that can be fair and equally acceptable to all people at all points of time, whether something so closely related to social and private life can be scripted through paper and words. Perfection is something that must be sought constantly in life; however, it holds different meanings for different people, and different meanings at different times. How it is being defined depends on who is defining it, yet Utopia is about making the closest possible definition of perfection and shaping people to fit into that definition.

It is possible to maintain the benefits of Utopia without actually divulging in it. Protopia for example holds all the constituents of social change and hope without including the concreteness of Utopia. Protopia is a better tomorrow without calling it Utopia. It does not exist without problems but calls for improvement little by little.

Karl R. Popper further insists that instead of working towards a predetermined 'better' future we should work to negate the social evils of our times. If we spare the effort and finances that we used for social experiments on eradicating hunger, poverty and illiteracy, we would have been met with more promising results. Dreams of a utopian state are unrealistic.

As far as utopia and dystopia are considered in literature, their functioning as genres provides an important space for criticism and opinion, but to consider these 'author constructed' worlds as literal objectives to aim at would be absurd. Tom Moylan's theory of 'critical utopia' adequately defines their use as literary works. 'Critical Utopia' is used to describe utopian literature as a dream while denying it as a blueprint.

## References

Booker, Keith. "Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1994, pp. 337-50. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4240370](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240370).

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge Classics) 1st (First) Edition*. 1st Edition, Routledge, 2022.

Guin, Le Ursula. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas: A Story (A Wind's Twelve Quarters Story)*. Harper Perennial, 2017.

LEVY, ZE'EV. "Utopia and Reality in the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1990, pp. 3–12. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20718997](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718997).

Lowry, Lois, and Craig Russell. *The Giver (Graphic Novel) (Giver Quartet, 1)*. Reprint, Clarion Books, 2020.

Popper, Karl R. "Utopia and Violence." *World Affairs*, vol. 149, no. 1, 1986, pp. 3–9. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20672078](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672078).

Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisted." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–37. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20719246](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246).

Shermer, Michael. "Utopia Is a Dangerous Ideal: We Should Aim for 'Protopia.'" *Aeon*, 7 Mar. 2018, [aeon.co/ideas/utopia-is-a-dangerous-ideal-we-should-aim-for-protopia](http://aeon.co/ideas/utopia-is-a-dangerous-ideal-we-should-aim-for-protopia).

"Utopia Conditions in England Summary and Analysis." *SparkNotes*, [www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/utopia/section3/page/2](http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/utopia/section3/page/2). Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY MAKING

*Ananya Nivsarkar*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

## **Abstract**

*John Dewey believed that the field of Philosophy is destined to have a much larger impact and influence on the affairs of the world. It is a shame that the philosophers are restricted (or some might even say restrict themselves) within the theoretical and abstract boundaries of the subject. The growing inclination towards scientific and evidence-based research and the waning belief in the academic involvement in practical problems of the world didn't help philosophy's case.*

*According to a few intellectuals, Public Policy is securely tied with an idea of a perfect society. It's closely related to human affairs and how to constantly improvise and upgrade the world we live in. An interpretation of public policy from this perspective makes it clear that philosophy can indeed have a solid influence in the making of that perfect society.*

*In this paper, I aim to explore the relationship between Policymaking and Philosophy. In the first half of the paper I'll take a very objective and sharp outlook at why should philosophers participate in the process of policymaking and how can they do so. In the second half, I intend to make this paper well-rounded by bringing in a critical perspective on why the involvement of philosophy in policy or public affairs, in general, might prove conflicting. I hope I leave the readers, not with a definite answer but rather with a growing curiosity on how academia can prove to be much more influential in practical affairs of the world than what the popular notion has influenced us to believe.*

**Keywords:** *Public Policy, Philosophy, Policymaking, Public Affairs, Ethics, Policy Analysis, Policymakers, Philosophers.*

## Introduction

Nobody knows at what time exactly Philosophy lost its social significance, thereafter adopting an institutional form. It started being glorified in terms of academic and theoretical rigor but lost its prior standing of being applied in various fields. It is assumed that approximately after 1900, Philosophers had only one home – the University, and within it, that peculiar institution known as the ‘department’ (Briggle and Frodeman). As Philosophy started losing its practical significance in the interplays of society, pure science started to take over.

One of the most crucial elements of a functioning society is policymaking. Philosophy's application to public policy is underexplored, in large part, because of the dominant perception that the scientific method alone holds the key to viable public policy (Chattha). The scientific tools employed during policy research are indeed of paramount importance, but they do little to inform us about the ethical implications and foundational assumptions of the policy at hand. Evidence-driven policy formulation can benefit greatly from the involvement of philosophy considering the distinct knowledge of abstract ideas and concepts that philosophers may possess. In the best formulated and executed policy, Philosophy can offer a vital if modest contribution to deliberation in the policy arena. (Conroy et al, 166)

Even though we can discuss and deliberate on how in an *'ideal scenario'*, contributions of Philosophy would benefit the policy space, philosophers are not precisely a welcomed figure in the public affairs. There is a particular scepticism about whether academics in general, and especially philosophers, understand how the “real” political world works and the constraints it puts on policymaking and policy. (Brock,789)

Despite all these reservations, nobody can deny that philosophers have all the right reasons to contribute to the ongoing debates in the policy space. When Philosophy is included within public affairs, the result may be analyses of policy issues reflecting a more realistic understanding of the constraints of political reality. (Brock,791)

History has witnessed the most crucial and foundational contributions that philosophers have delivered in order to shape our society into what it is today, and thus, it is high time that this field is revived from its institutional coma.

In this paper, I aim to explore this complicated relationship between Philosophy and Policymaking at a very basic level. I'll attempt to convey why philosophers should be



contributing to the policymaking agenda and how can they do so to the best of their abilities.

### **Why Should Philosophers Participate In The Process Of Policymaking?**

Quite a few philosophers shy away from participating and engaging in discussions centered around policy mostly because they feel inclined to invest their time to get a deeper understanding of the topic which would only come through studying the abstract idea. Rawls assumed that some abstraction from existing policies and circumstances was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of justice. Attention to details, however, can also be enlightening. (Engster)

Daniel Engster in his research article for the Oxford University Press conferred an in-depth discussion about the important and compelling reasons as to why philosophers should take up policy analysis. A number of social policies, upon a curious inspection, present very specific philosophical questions that presently don't have much discourse. Policies around healthcare, job opportunities, education, and finance present very intricate philosophical loopholes that are still underexplored. This lack of research from a philosophical point of view can be attributed to the growing importance of evidence science-based research on philosophy.

There is also a growing need in the social and political sector to analyse '*justice*' and gain a deeper understanding of it. As mentioned above as well, Rawls' was inclined towards abstraction as a way to gain a deeper understanding of justice, but few details in social policies that expose their implementation and conceptual gaps can also assist us in analysing the idea of justice from different perspective.

Engster explains this need for research on justice in much greater detail with an example of "Policies for the economically disadvantaged." He points out how philosophers still haven't invested their time to read into and explore more about the demographic characteristics of the population that live in or near poverty and are caregivers of dependent individuals. He proposes that dwelling deeper into that field might foster new perspectives and arguments to formulate suitable and sustainable policies for the population-in-concern.

More than anything, philosophers should contribute to the ongoing debates and deliberations about policy and add to the country's policymaking as they have a plethora of knowledge to contribute. Political Philosophy and Ethics can have a great deal of

influence on the current policy debates, and this has tremendous potential to enhance and improve the pre-existing and future policies. Contribution of Political and Ethics philosophers can influence other philosophers to take a deeper dive into political analysis with respect to their own fields. This can, therefore, initiate a chain effect that'll fulfill the above-mentioned pointers as well.

### **How Can Philosophers Contribute To Public Policy?**

Sidney Hook in his paper, titled "Philosophy and Public Policy", proposes to put this question on how philosophers can contribute to public policy, in a different way. According to him, rather than questioning "how", we should divert our focus on "what" a philosopher can contribute to the policymaking process that would be different from the other professionals or even academicians engaged in the process. Along with this, it can also involve what a philosopher should ideally be expected to do in that process.

Philosophers aren't uniquely trained to respond to policy-specific questions or situations. Hook views it as a lack that can't be compensated for and insists on accepting the fact that as soon as a philosopher enters the public policy space, he is out of his field. So, a philosopher is invariably expected to have in-depth knowledge about the subject matter at hand and be aware of all the facts prior to the course of action. Lack of familiarity with facts can lead to disastrous analysis and moral conclusions. It has happened multiple times in the past that a philosophical perspective or conclusion in a particular situation has become controversial for its problematic elements, which essentially stemmed from unverified or lack of facts.<sup>1</sup>

Another thing we ideally should expect philosophers to do is to employ a "methodological sophistication" that would assist in making the issue at hand clearer in a public controversy or exposes the absence of a genuine issue. This would in turn help to clarify which options would be appropriate to make the final decision.

An obvious contribution to the public policy realm by philosophers would be the addition of a philosophical perspective. It doesn't necessarily mean providing a philosophically concentrated view of every point but rather, according to Hook, can mean filtering factual and ideological issues from each other. Various social policies have a very complicated and intricate political-moral relationship, that needs to be combed through in order to arrive at an unbiased decision.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hook talks about how in the 1960s some philosophers had implied a similarity between repression in the United States and Hitler's Germany. It highlighted the sheer ignorance of how Hitler's Germany truly was and the how much freedom of dissent is in the US. It exposed their vulnerabilities to this new minted theory of social-fascism.

A philosopher also needs to unearth and explicitly mention ethical issues surrounding public policies. They need to relate it to the ideal society they wish to foster and the ideal citizens they wish to develop. It is here that the philosopher's professional interest in systemic moral evaluation, or his vocation as a moralist, should sensitize him to the presence of moral issues in what is sometimes regarded as a "*purely factual inquiry*". (Hook, 1970)

There should not be a bias in the philosopher's analysis regarding his own intellectual findings and moral concerns. They should never lose their objectivity and be ready to face the truth whenever confronted with it. Public Affairs is a tricky field to be staunchly inclined towards moral philosophy. There would be multiple instances where compromises would have to be made or clever guesswork, irrespective of what the analysis conveys, would have to be done. Policy demands objectivity and an unbiased perspective.

### **A Critical Perspective**

Despite making a case in favour of philosophers to participate in the process of policymaking, it'll be a rude ignorance not to address the various conflicts between philosophy and the process of policymaking. The two conflicts that I intend to discuss further in this paper may not be direct but they do pose a challenge for philosophers and the field of Philosophy in general.

One point of conflict that has the potential to break the foundations of all the arguments presented in favour of Philosophy being involved in policymaking, is the view (for some, it might even be a hard fact) that the essential goals of Philosophy (which is academia centric) and Public Policy are drastically different. Because of these drastically different end goals, the intentions of the professionals working in these respective fields towards a common goal (a policy formulation in this case) might also be drastically different.

Academic philosophy is highly focused on the importance of evidence and arguments. So much so, that this importance precedes and sometimes even ignores the social consequences of engaging with such an eminent process. The goal is to perpetually work towards the discovery of truth (in the concerned context) and present it as it is, even regardless of it contradicting popular views.

In Philosophy, especially, nothing is to be immune from questions and criticisms; all assumptions are open to and must withstand critical scrutiny (Brock, 1987). This can be a tricky and risky practice since it restricts the consideration of criticisms related to those assumptions.

An indispensable rule for public policy professionals is to make sure that their primary consideration should be the consequences of their actions/policy formulated on the public. Therefore, anyone for that matter who participates in this very critical exercise of forming policies that have the potential to dictate the lifestyles of people would be extremely irresponsible, if they didn't pay heed to the consequences that their actions would have on the policy formulation and ultimately the public itself. This does not mean that the scholars who hold this view or even I, myself, think that public policy thus has no space for moral evaluations. It's just saying that academic and scholarly endeavors (which philosophy essentially focuses upon) don't have the same, or as direct of an impact on the public that the professional endeavors of public policy professionals may have. When philosophers move into the public domain, they must shift their primary commitment from knowledge and truth to the policy consequences of what they do (Brock, 1987). If not, the philosophers won't fulfill their primary goal of serving in the public policy domain and often will prove to be ineffective and irresponsible.

Another point of conflict is the discrepancy between policy professionals' formulations and defense of a policy and philosophy scholars' formulation and defense of a policy. This "defense and formulation" is extremely critical to the acceptance of a policy. Often, the arguments presented by the philosophy scholars are taken as bizarre or surprising. This won't be helpful in making the particular policy more acceptable to public and creates a point of contradiction between what policy professionals think is right and what philosophy scholars think is right. The assumption that philosophers do not care about feedback or acceptance of their views is wrong. The difference is that they don't just want to build allies that policy professionals do through lobbying. They want other scholars to use their own critical thinking process, analyse the arguments and then accept what they propose.

## **Conclusion**

Since Plato, philosophers have been involved in public affairs and directing how society should ideally function. The world has been witnessing a rise and fall in the involvement of philosophers in the political space for centuries now, especially in the practical workings. All through it, a consistent agreement amongst those who witnessed philosophers as

public service officials was that philosophers are *not* meant for this job. They are better involved as critics than actual officials. A job of a critic in the public affairs space would come very organically to any philosopher, given that philosophers have better awareness and understanding of the differences that tend to exist between the ideal and the actual. Because philosophical inquiries are comprehensive, detailed, and well-reasoned, philosophers are well acquainted with the skill of detecting the need for and providing relevant alternatives to already proposed decisions or conclusions. Above all, they cannot, without stultification give their primary intellectual loyalty to any nation, cause, party, or organisation, but only to the truth as they see it (Hook, 1970)

When it comes to a critical evaluation of philosophers' involvement in public affairs, most of their faults can't be attributed to flaws in the analysis or inefficiency of work. Rather, it is from "mistakes of advocacy". Moreover, nobody can deny that a lot of subject areas need the viewpoints of practical experiences more than theoretical based interventions. Pure theory can only guide the problem till a certain point after which the decision has to be made based on practical learnings and experiences. This does not bring down the importance of a philosopher's contribution in any way. Most of the well-known philosophers like Spinoza or Kant, who did actively engage in the analysis and commentary on public affairs weren't just appreciated for their analysis, but are still read and referred to because through their analysis, they were able to process many complex and intricate ideas relating to human excellence and social life. Ultimately, a philosopher is a pursuer of wisdom wherever he finds himself, in any clime and in any culture (Hook, 1970).

## Bibliography

Briggle, Adam, and Robert Frodeman. "Why Policy Needs Philosophers As Much As It Needs Science". *The Guardian*, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/oct/13/why-policy-needs-philosophers-as-much-as-it-needs-science>

Brock, Dan W. "Truth Or Consequences: The Role Of Philosophers In Policy-Making". *Ethics*, vol 97, no. 4, 1987, pp. 786-791. *University Of Chicago Press*, <https://doi.org/10.1086/292891>

Chattha, Muhammad. "Philosophy & Policy". *DAWN.COM*, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1566502>

CONROY, JAMES C. et al. "Philosophy As A Basis For Policy And Practice: What Confidence Can We Have In Philosophical Analysis And Argument?". *Journal Of Philosophy Of Education*, vol 42, 2008, pp. 165-182. Wiley

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2008.00631.x>

Engster, Daniel. "What Can Political Philosophy Contribute To Policy Debates? | Oupblog". *Oupblog*, 2016,

<https://blog.oup.com/2016/02/political-philosophy-policy-debates/>

Hook, Sidney. "Philosophy And Public Policy". *The Journal Of Philosophy*, vol 67, no. 14, 1970, p. 461. *Philosophy Documentation Center*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2024107>

KULENOVIC, ENES. "Political Philosophy And Public Policy: Six Models". *Philosophy And Public Issues (New Series)*, vol 4, no. 3, 2014, pp. 21-35.,

[http://fqp.luiss.it/files/2015/01/3\\_Kulenovic\\_Political-Philosophy-Public-Policy\\_PPI\\_vol4\\_n3\\_2014.pdf](http://fqp.luiss.it/files/2015/01/3_Kulenovic_Political-Philosophy-Public-Policy_PPI_vol4_n3_2014.pdf)

Ling, Siow May et al. "Philosophy And Policy, Then And Now: Unfolding The Rural Tourism Policy Perspectives In Malaysia". *Global Journal Of Management And Business Research: F Real Estate Event & Tourism Management*, vol 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 29-34.,

[https://globaljournals.org/GJMBR\\_Volume14/4-Philosophy-and-Policy-then-and-Now.pdf](https://globaljournals.org/GJMBR_Volume14/4-Philosophy-and-Policy-then-and-Now.pdf)

## CULTURE, GENDER AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

*Darshana Singh*

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

### **Abstract**

*Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Frost are some of the many poets who through their words and metaphors have strived to express the extensive beauty and worth of Nature. It is in truth that while both nature and humanity have evolved and endured together, the greed of few men has left the others to shoulder its repercussions. This paper attempts to discuss the importance of people whose actions have had a constructive impact on the environment. It is divided into two sections; the first section explores women's association with and contribution to Nature and how they are affected by the latter's destruction. It also addresses topics of gender disparity, environmental feminism, and ecological protests initiated by women. The second section discusses the importance of indigenous beliefs and traditional practices followed by justifications for their victimhood at the hands of both social discrimination and natural destruction.*

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, Climate Change, Nature, Environmental protests, Social and gender inequity.*

*“The World is Changed. I Feel it in the Water. I Feel it in the Earth.”*

*J.R.R TOLKIEN (Fellowship of the Ring)*

## **Introduction**

Climate change, which is a recurring phenomenon, has been explained by many intellectuals. Its occurrence, causes and the detrimental effects that it is currently leading to is continuously being studied and investigated. The United Nations has defined Climate change as “the long-term shift in temperature or weather patterns”. It is often considered that the era of industrialization has accelerated the process of Climate change. The uncontrollable and continuous use of fossil fuels and practices of desertification which are still ongoing have resulted in climatic chaos. The effects of climate change vary from gradual rise in maximum temperature to instant disasters like severe floods or drought. Without doubt women and native people are at the frontlines in experiencing these detrimental effects of climate change. Despite being the leading participants in environmental conservation, they are the most vulnerable during times of ecological destruction. The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations) clearly states that almost 43 percent of rural women of developing countries are involved in agriculture. Their contribution towards nature is not just limited to being agricultural labourers as their life of domesticity is itself intervened with nature. From rearing cattles to making dung cakes, women have always used natural resources in a befitting manner. It is also a well accepted fact that the traditional practices performed by indigenous people and women have played a substantial role in ecological conservation. Their connection and innate concern for nature and its resources are the sole reasons for the remaining protected riches that are yet to come into the hands of industrialists.

## **Women And Nature**

*“Men may be stronger, but it is women who endure”*

*Cassandra Clare (Clockwork Princess)*

For years, in various customs and traditions women have been considered the caretakers of the community whereas men were the ones who engaged themselves in wars and battles in order to acquire power and protect their territory and people, despite the fact that often they were the ones who instigated such havoc and ruination throughout the course of history.



Diverse faiths and cultures have continued to associate women with nature through literature, poems, songs and so on. Terms like Mother Nature, Gaia (Greek Goddess), Earth Mother are often used to refer to the earth as a female goddess and protector.

“माता भूमिः पुत्रो अहं पृथिव्याः ॥” (Atharva Veda)

“ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਪਾਣੀ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ ॥

ਦਿਵਸੁ ਰਾਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਦਾਈ ਦਾਇਆ ਖੇਲੈ ਸਗਲ ਜਗਤੁ ॥” (SGGS)

The former excerpt is from the Vedic scripture Atharva Veda (Fourth Veda) of Hinduism. It affirms “Earth as our mother and all of us as her children”. Hindus, through their scriptures, customs, and rituals like *Bhoomi Poojan*, or *Keddaso* have always worshiped nature and its components. It's not just Hindu culture that is persistent in symbolizing earth as a deity, several other cultures have continued to do the same. For example, in Greek mythology – “Gaia”, a Greek goddess is often identified as Mother Earth. The latter verse cited above is a Salok taken from the morning prayer (Japji Sahib) of the Sikhs. It has symbolized the natural elements such as Air, Water and, Earth respectively with Guru, Father and, Great Mother of all.

However, at present Nature and women have been turned into passive objects, to be used and exploited for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable desires of alienated men. “From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women have been reduced to being 'resources' in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment” (Shiva 5).

In India, a major percentage of rural women are engaged in agriculture and its diverse branches. They have continued to play their role as cultivators, labourers, and livestock farmers, despite facing the cruel discrimination of society. As surveys<sup>2</sup> have proven, a woman's work is more than that of men and farm animals. “For a one-hectare farm, women put in 640 hours for interculture operations like weeding; 384 hours for irrigation; 650 hours for transporting organic manure and transferring it to the field; 557 hours for seed sowing (with men) and 984 hours for harvesting and threshing” (Shiva 105-106).

Regardless of working the same hours and with the same tenacity women are hardly given credit for their hard labour. From getting low wages to having lack of ownership, knowledge, finance, necessities and the suitable working hours and conditions, there is no end to the innumerable problems that women, especially in the agricultural sector, face.

Though over the years there has been a significant improvement in wage disparity between male and female farmers, there is still a gap of inequality. A report by FLO 2019-20 (FICCI Ladies organisation) has stated that there are only 9% of female owners for activities other than crop production and plantation, and overall, only 21% female owners in the agricultural sector.

### **Ecofeminism**

This social, political and economic domination faced by both women and nature has led to many people considering the idea of Ecofeminism (also called Environmental Feminism) which explains the connection between women and nature as victims of male oppression. Renowned eco-feminists like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Carolyn Merchant, and Wangari Muta Maathai have penned down their thoughts on the relationship between women and nature and how the degradation of one is affecting the other.

At first it was the attribute of 'femininity' which was common in both women and nature that constructed this particular idea of ecofeminism. But later philosophers and thinkers associated with this discipline, came up with various traits of similarity between them.

Principles of varied kinds are associated with ecofeminism, with spiritual ecofeminism 'centering around values of compassion, care and non-violence, and initiating women to celebrate or love their life' (Mies, Shiva 500-501); whereas radical ecofeminism viewed this concept as a product of dominant patriarchal society. But prominent ecofeminists like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva however, held to other theories as they blamed the domination and influence of modern technologies (modern science ecofeminism) and the 'concept of labour, property and power' (materialist ecofeminism) for the subjugation over both women and nature.

Bina Agrawal, renowned Indian economist and environmentalist has astutely explained class-gender effects and how women and female children are the ones who are most adversely affected by environmental degradation. She provides the following reasons – 1) First, there "is a pre-existing gender division of labour". As it is women in poor peasant and tribal households who are preoccupied not only with the household responsibilities but also with the works of the 'gathering and fetching from the forests, village commons, rivers, and wells'. 2) Second, there are "systematic gender differences in the distribution of subsistence resources (including food and health care) within rural households, as revealed by a range of indicators - anthropometric indices, morbidity and mortality rates, hospital admissions data, and the sex ratio". These differences are found majorly in India and South

Asia, particularly in the Health sector. 3) Third, women face significant inequality in access to the 'most critical productive resources in rural economies, agricultural land, and associated production technology'. "Women also have a systematically disadvantaged position in the labour market. They have fewer employment opportunities, less occupational mobility, lower levels of training, and lower payments for the same or similar work". 4) Lastly she points out "the limited rights in private property resources such as agricultural land, rights to communal resources such as the village commons have always provided rural women and children (especially those of tribal, landless, or marginal peasant households) a source of subsistence, unmediated by dependency relationships on an adult male".(Agrawal 136-138)These arguments provided by Aggarwal surely solidify the key point of the innumerable risks that women, especially in rural areas are exposed to due to environmental degradation.

Ecological destruction has increased the continuous occurrence of severe droughts and floods especially in recent years which damages the crops and fertile lands of farmers. These calamities spoil their stocks and storehouses, harming their livestock which then affects their wages. Women labourers who already receive less wages than men, are more affected in such situations. The lack of wages forces many poor families to cut down their other costs, these are often led by sacrificing needs and desires, especially of their own women and female children by discontinuing their education or by not considering their rights to proper sanitation or health.

Health has become a major difficulty for them, as often the living conditions of women laborers are poor. Because of such destitution, women often tend to ignore their own health and well-being. The lack of proper knowledge of sanitation or presence of clean toilets have caused many women to suffer from severe sickness.

Vandana Shiva who is a notable Indian scholar, a strongly opinionated environmental activist and an ecofeminist has written numerous articles and books, articulating her belief of how domination of women in such a patriarchal world is the same as nature being dominated by the continuing industrialization. She believes that the difficulty for both women and nature started with post colonization especially due to the Green revolution as she quotes "forty centuries of knowledge of agriculture began to be eroded and erased as the green revolution, designed by multinational corporations and western male experts, homogenised nature's diversity and the diversity of human knowledge on a reductionist pattern of agriculture". She asserts that the use of machines, HVY seeds, chemicals and fertilizers has just degraded our fertility in the long term. Above arguments presented by Shiva suggest that the government's approach to increase agricultural production because

of the scarcity of foods in India by implementing the green revolution was inexact and its effectiveness is surely debatable.

### **Ecological Protests Led By Women**

Over the course of history, women have continued to be protesters of environmental disruption. The following section describes some of the many ecological movements which were initiated by women.

#### ***Chipko Movement***

The non-violent movement which took place in 1973 in the Terai region which lies in the outer foothills of the Himalayas (now in Uttarakhand) was led by female activists - Gauri Devi and Bachni Devi. The movement took place because of the sports manufacturing company which was permitted by the government to extract wood from a particular forested area. The local community and women whose livelihoods were completely dependent on the forest resources saw themselves being threatened and hence infringed. All rural women came together and protested against the contractors who came to cut down the trees, by hugging the trees. Hence, the name Chipko was proposed as it means "to hug" or "to embrace".

The movement was itself unique because of the large number of women of not only that particular community but from other districts as well (as later the movement spread throughout the country) who actively participated in it and made it successful. Later Sunder Lal Bahuguna joined the movement and his guidance and counsel played a major role in giving direction to it as it was his appeal to the government that made them retract their orders and also legislate a 15-year ban on commercial deforestation in Uttarakhand.

#### ***Green Belt Movement (GBM)***

The movement was founded in 1977 by Professor Wangari Muta Maathai (Environmental and political activist, and Nobel Peace Laureate) to support the food security of Kenyan women and reduce poverty by helping them in obtaining basic necessities like fuel and fodder, and with environmental degradation.

The movement basically focuses on political, social, economic as well as environmental upliftment as it opposes objectionable actions like deforestation, pollution, etc which have led to Climate Change. It conducts various awareness campaigns in order to educate people on Tree planting and Water harvesting.

Throughout the years GBM has affiliated with many organizations and has launched numerous projects with regard to environmental protection. The aim of the projects vary from tree planting to providing ecological awareness programs. The organisation has to date planted 51 million trees in Kenya.

### ***Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)***

NBA is a non-violent and socialist movement that started in 1985 against the construction of large dams on the Narmada River. The Narmada project of Sardar Sarovar Dam basically proposed the construction of 30 large dams, 135 medium dams, and about 3000 small dams to use the stored water for irrigation, electricity, hydropower and for other purposes. But all these exploits were at the cost of numerous people who lost their lands and houses. About 2.5 lacs people were displaced, and 25 villages and forests were submerged.

Seeing this human and environmental abuse, Medha Patkar along with thousands of women, farmers, tribal people, human rights and environmental activists strongly protested against the government. She organized many rallies, hunger strikes, and marches and also encouraged and supported the various communities that were formed against the project. The movement was also supported by famous celebrities and personalities like Arundhati Roy, Aamir Khan, Indian Ocean (Indian rock band), and many others who actively joined the protest and supported the people.

The continued mass protests made the World Bank and other foreign investors withdraw their funds in 1993, this acted as the first taste of success for the people. The withdrawal of the World Bank also forced the government to halt the construction and focus on the safe and easy re-habitation of the people which was one of the key issues raised by the protesters.

It's not just through rallies or mass strikes that women have been able to make a difference. They choose different ways to express their thoughts and emotions. For some, it's literature – like Rachel Carson (*The Silent Spring*) who is also known as the “Mother of Environmental Movements” or Françoise d'Eaubonne (French author) whose book - *Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death)* coined the term Ecofeminism; while others choose art like Mary Mattingly's – “*Life of objects*”, or Mira Lehr's – “*A Walk in the Garden.*” These are some of the many works done by women who through their work have tried to show how women and nature are alike.

### **Indigenous People And Nature**

Indigenous communities have always aimed to preserve their habitats, and have continued to live in the middle of nature without concerning themselves with the materialistic objects of the world. They adhere to their own practices and traditions which consider nature to be sacred. Most tribals follow animism as they attribute plants, animals, or inanimate objects and phenomena with greater divinity. These traditional practices and beliefs which for years have been considered faulty by many adepts, have been in reality, the most sustainable approach.

This intimate relationship between Indigenous people and nature and its resources is quite crucial as their knowledge and practices for the sustainable use of nature is the thread that still continues to spare us from the severe manifestations of Climate change. There is no one reason or philosophy for why these native people continue to surround themselves with nature and its components by avoiding the artificiality of the materialistic world. The answers can be multiple according to their diverse beliefs. For some tribal communities, nature can be spiritually associated with divinity while other tribes are beyond such ideas of godliness.

There is also the well known concept of the Nature-Man-Spirit complex conceived by L.P. Vidyarthi which describes the close interconnection and interdependence between nature, man and spirit of the hill tribe of Bihar - the Maler. Vidyarthi through his research found that the life of the Maler tribe was entirely 'influenced by nature on the one hand and the spirit on the other'. Later many researchers who analysed and re-examined it with other tribes found this theory valid.

Tribals from diverse cultures have continued to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature. Both men and women in indigenous communities from their early life have been taught the importance and values of nature. Women in such communities are involved not only with the tasks of gathering forest produce or with herding or rearing cattles, they are equally part of hunting and were being taught it from a young age just like men. . "Tribal women play a major role in protecting the environment. Meghalaya, one of the Northeastern states, has many women activists who are actively involved in working towards environmental protection" (Agarwala, 2006). In North-east India, tribes like Khasi, Jaintia and Garo women follow matrilineal culture, with women often being the heads of clans or being the property owners of lands.

### **Indigenous Knowledge And Practices**

Traditional Agricultural Practices are 'conservative and localized in the indigenous community'. "These practices are adaptive to the local environment and based on indigenous local knowledge (ILK) which grants them more pliability where other practices may fail. They can be defined as a set of knowledge – practice - trust nexus which has developed by its adaptive nature and passed on to the next generation through a cultural transmission that explains the relationship between living beings with their environment" (Berkes et al. 2000). Their organic practices are way more effective and durable, unlike the chemical products which increase productivity but also decrease the fertility of soil over time.

Practices like agroforestry, crop rotation, polyculture, and intercropping are highly sustainable and non-polluting. They revive soil fertility and help to increase production. These practices of growing different crops in the same field help to utilize all the minerals and nutrients present in the soil without depending on external sources (chemical fertilizers and pesticides). They also reduce soil erosion and increase carbon sequestration. However, the knowledge of indigenous communities is not agriculture specific, as they also have a great knowledge of medicine and botany in addition to their unique and conventional natural resource management techniques which they still continue to use. For instance, the 3500 year old rainwater harvesting technique used by Indian tribals or the Aboriginal Fire management technique used by the Australian indigenous people to protect their landscapes.

### **Impact From Climate Change**

But despite being the sole contributors they are the ones who are severely affected by Climate Change. The constant change in weather or temperature, and frequent occurrence of drought and flood have gravely affected their crop production and tribe. It also takes a toll on their health, as a recent international review revealed that health and social outcomes compared on 9 indicators were poorer for tribal people than the rest of the population in most countries. Life expectancy at birth for the ST population in India is 63.9 years, as against 67 years for the general population. Alarmingly almost 50% of adolescent ST girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years are underweight or have a BMI (Body Mass Index) of less than 18.5. NFHS 3 (National Family Health Survey) shows that 65% of tribal women in the 15-49 years age group suffer from anaemia as against 46.9% of other (non-SC, ST) women. The ST IMR (Infant Mortality Rate) in India was the highest in the world among indigenous populations, next only to the Federally administered Area in Pakistan. As per NFHS 4, the estimated IMR for the ST population in 2014 was 44.4, the

1-4-year mortality rate was 13.4, and the under 5 Mortality rate was 57.2 per 1000 live births (Tribal Health in India 4-9).

Indigenous people have been continuously denied their rights of land, education, health, employment, etc. Activities like deforestation, mining, and industrial construction concessioned by either the government or private firms have forcibly displaced them from their own lands without providing secure rehabilitation. The poor condition of the educational and employment sectors has also stunted the growth of tribals. Lack of trained teachers and basic amenities like toilets, drinking water, school meals, classroom, and study resources have severely affected their education. All these factors have led to an increase in their state of poverty and lack of resources.

Indigenous people are victims of not only inequality but also of natural destruction. But in spite of being recipients of such injustice, they never cease to care for or protect nature. Throughout history tribals have always objected whenever their territory was threatened. They have initiated and participated in various ecological movements. Bishnoi Movement is one such historical incident that occurred in the early eighteenth century in a small village of Khejarli (currently in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan). The Bishnoi community who were the locals of the village followed the teachings of Guru Jambheshwar, who delivered 29 principles, promoting moral, health and environmental well-being. The incident occurred because of the Maharaja of Marwar who instructed to cut down the Khejri trees. When Amrita Devi, a local woman came to know about it, she along with her three daughters strongly protested against it. She hugged the trees and was ready to give her life for her faith. Seeing that, many villagers supported her action by also holding on to the trunks. They all laid down their lives for the protection of their culture, and beliefs. Maharaja Ajay Singh who immediately retracted his order after being reported of such violent commotion, and apologised to the community and later issued a directive forbidding cutting down trees in the respective region.

To honour the memory and sacrifice of Amrita Devi and the 363 Bishnoi members, the Government of India on 11 September 2001 initiated a national award – “Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection Award” to accolade all such people who have contributed towards environmental and wildlife protection.

The Bishnoi episode has continued to influence many environmental drives in India like the Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Jungle Bachao Andolan and numerous others, confirming that Indigenous people have always challenged the authority of those in power whenever their territory is breached.



## Conclusion

Gender and culture are key representatives of nature; their growth and development are interwoven. Women and nature are bonded together not just because they have an innate quality of providing for others but also because they both have been the victims of male domination and exploitation. Indigenous people who continue to surround themselves with nature and consolidate it using their rich traditional practices and knowledge are also the frontline victims of natural disasters when throughout their lives they have had the sole purpose to defend and protect their lands from the hands of materialistic men.

Nevertheless these two sections of our society have continued to face the daunting side of the climate crisis. Both women and tribals have not only been subjected to social, political and economic inequalities within our society but also have been particularly put through uncontrolled and inevitable natural catastrophes.

## References

1. Agrawal, Bina. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India." *Feminist Studies* Vol 18 No 1. Feminist Studies, Inc. 1992, PP 119-158.
2. Berkes F, Colding J, Folke C. "Rediscovery of traditional ecological knowledge as adaptive management." *Ecol Appl*, 2000, 10(5):1251-1262.
3. Clare, Cassandra. *Clockwork Princess*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2013.
4. Etchart, Linda. *The role of indigenous peoples in combating climate change*, Palgrave Communication, 2017.
5. FAO. "Forest Governance by Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, An opportunity for climate action in Latin America and the Caribbean", 2021.
6. Mies Maria, Shiva Vandana. "Ecofeminism". In *Feminism* edited by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (1993). PP - 497-502.
7. Mikkelsen, Cæcilie. *Indigenous Peoples, Gender, and Natural Resource Management*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). Copenhagen, 2005.

8. Nayak, Jayanta Kumar. An Anthropological Observation on the Role of Tribal Communities in the Conservation of Biodiversity, ResearchGate, 2016.
9. Nellemann, Christian. *Women at the frontline of climate change: gender risks and hopes (a rapid response assessment)*, Grid Arendal, 2012.
10. Palliyalil, Sruthi. Women, Nature and Culture: An Ecofeminist Reading of the Matrilineal Culture of the Khasis, Jaintia and Garo Tribes of Meghalaya. Research gate, 2020.
11. Patel, Sanoj Kumar. "Traditional agricultural practices in India: an approach for environmental sustainability and food security, Energy Ecology and Environment". *Springer-Verlag*, 2020, PP- 253-271.
12. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for Women. New Delhi, 1988.
13. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1954.
14. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Tribal Health in India, Bridging the gap and roadmap for future. [http://nhm.gov.in/nhm\\_components/tribal\\_report/Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://nhm.gov.in/nhm_components/tribal_report/Executive_Summary.pdf). Accessed 2 May, 2022.
15. Warren, Karen J. "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism", *Environmental Ethics* Vol 12 Issue 12, 1990, PP- 125-146.
16. "What is Climate Change?". *United Nations*, [www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change/](http://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change/) Accessed 2 May 2022.
17. "The Green belt movement", *The Green belt movement*, April 22, 2021, [www.greenbeltmovement.org/](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/)
18. "Narmada Bachao Andolan NBA: Save The Narmada Movement", *BYJUS*, December 24, 2021, [byjus.com/free-ias-prep/narmada-bachao-andolan-nba/](http://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/narmada-bachao-andolan-nba/),
19. "Bishnoi Movement: UPSC Notes", *BYJUS*, November 18, 2021, [byjus.com/free-ias-prep/bishnoi-movement/](http://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/bishnoi-movement/)

20. Viridi, Kuldip S. "Sharing the Sikh Experience", *SikhNet*, August 7, 2008, [www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?t=669](http://www.sikhnet.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?t=669) Shlok Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS)
21. "What do Vedas say about the earth", *Hinduism Stack Exchange*, February 1, 2016, [hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/12483/what-do-the-vedas-say-about-the-earth](http://hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/12483/what-do-the-vedas-say-about-the-earth)

## **“WHAT DOESN’T KILL ME, MAKES ME STRONGER.”**

### **MAXIM #8, TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS**

*(understanding Nietzsche’s motive behind enjoying the process of experiencing vicarious tragedies)*

Aadrika Sominder

Lady Shri Ram College for Women

#### **Abstract**

*The term ‘tragedy’ was coined in Ancient Greece by the Greeks of Attica, who first used the word in the 5th century BCE to describe a specific genre of theatre which was performed at festivals. The Greek ‘tragedy’ took the world of aesthetics by storm, and from then it was simply a matter of time before the idea of ‘tragic art’ was sensationalised.*

*German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche believed, greatly, in the influence of tragedy on Greek art and divided the Greek theatre into two halves- the Dionysian and the Apollonian- which came together to form a chorus that depicted tragedy in such a way that it made the viewers ‘self-affirm’ their existence. He called tragic art a necessity to life because of this self affirming property.*

*This paper attempts to explore Nietzsche’s view on the ‘paradox of tragedy’. I will explore why he believed that a viewer of Greek tragic theatre ‘self affirmed’ themselves in the face of such art. I will also explore how that ‘self affirmation’ comes about in the context of Greek theatre, and what ‘self affirmation’ actually is to Nietzsche. This will be done using his explanations of imaginary cause<sup>1</sup> as well as his opinions on the ‘paradox of tragedy’ using the Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, and various other readings.*

**Keywords:** *Tragedy, Nietzsche, Pleasure, Art, Aesthetics.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche (1889), *Twilight of Idols* (translated by R. J. Hollingdale)

## Introduction to Tragedy

The “paradox of tragedy”, a term which applies to the puzzle of explaining why we enjoy tragedies when they provoke negative emotions, has generated a great deal of discussion in aesthetics. While the beginning of this discourse may be attributed to Aristotle’s contention<sup>2</sup> in that- the pleasure of tragedy is that which derives from pity and fear by means of “mimesis”<sup>3</sup>, the classic culprit is actually Hume<sup>4</sup>, who said:

*“It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.”*

Hume said his lines with reference to rhetoric, painting and music, but the origination of tragedy was actually in theatre. Or Greek theatre, to be more specific. Even the most generally accepted source of the word ‘tragedy’<sup>5</sup> is the Greek *tragōidia*, or “goat-song,” from *tragos* (“goat”) and *aeidein* (“to sing”).

The Greeks gave the world the trifecta of Greek tragedy namely literary artists, Aeschyles, Sophocles and Euripides who managed to display a remarkable talent of probing into the nature of existence through their writing; their plays included a level of psychological insight that has been analysed time and time again. And like everything in life- over time, the mark that tragic *theatre* left on the world slowly faded away, and performance arts took a backseat while other forms of art evolved around this emotion in an attempt to create an equally immersive, aesthetic experience.

So while the word *tragedy* is often used loosely to describe any sort of disaster or misfortune, it more precisely refers to a work of art that deals with questions of the metaphysical concerning the role of man in the universe.

## Tragedy in Art

The Guernica is a very famous painting created by Pablo Picasso after the Spanish Civil

---

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle (1969), *Aristotle’s Poetics* 14

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s concept of imitation in acting; to represent nature through imitation which is different from copying in the sense of contrasting being from the becoming i.e we become nature, we are the being.

<sup>4</sup> Hume, *On Tragedy and the Passions*

<sup>5</sup> Conversi, L. W. and Sewall, Richard B. (2021, December 20). *tragedy*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

War. As it matured, it became one of the greatest works of modern art ever created.

It is claimed that the painting below was to be an interior of an artist's studio at first but the bombing of Picasso's beloved Guernica change the whole pace of the piece. Over time, the piece became synonymous in places where defenceless civilians came under attack. And by doing so, it began to take on particular resonance for anti-war protestors who began treating the piece as a source of motivation and the tragedy of the Spanish town as a reference. The way the *Guernica* shows the tragedies of war and the suffering it inflicts upon individuals became iconic, and the mural became much more than even Pablo could predict - becoming an embodiment of peace.



The genius of *Guernica* was that it successfully combined dreamlike (some might say nightmarish) elements of Surrealism with multiple perspectives of Cubism- the art of war takes on new meaning here. The *Guernica* is considered to be one of the most 'moving and powerful anti-war paintings' but when Picasso was commissioned to create this painting, it was to be a decidedly apolitical piece that would show the tendencies of a great artist who knew his subjects. Despite that, when his Spanish town of Guernica was bombed in 1937, the painting took on a new life encompassing an overall theme of suffering and it is then that the painting became the centre of tragic art.

And though each part of the painting has a nuanced meaning, they are ultimately grouped as a broader statement about destruction and strength, and famously “depicts the effects of brutality that strikes from nowhere; it speaks of suffering and of hope.”

The reason I'm referencing this painting, is to ask one question that lies at the crux of my paper: How can a spectator feel desirable feelings like hope, through viewing art focused on tragic themes that encompass undesirable feelings like hate, danger and terror?

### **A Few Explanations Regarding The ‘paradox Of Tragedy’**

Aristotle explains in his *Rhetoric*<sup>6</sup>, that we (the spectators) tend to pity someone who suffers undeserved misfortune, in addition to that, we have a natural fear of what is dangerous.

A tragic character, he believed, must be presented as a better person than most so that his suffering will be seen as undeserved and hence pitiable, even though the suffering comes about because the protagonist makes some kind of mistake or error in judgment<sup>7</sup>. Even if tragedies have happy endings- the *threat* of suffering (that a spectator feels while watching/viewing tragic art) is capable of generating the ‘tragic emotions’, even when the suffering itself is avoided.

When these emotions are generated we feel *Katharsis* i.e a type of purification and purgation of emotions brought about through dramatic art; it also defines any extreme emotional state that results in renewal and restoration of the being.

Unfortunately, the passage quoted below contains the *Poetics*' only occurrence of *katharsis* in the relevant sense and no explanation of what it means:

*“Aristotle uses katharsis in a medical sense, to refer to a useful type of purging that is induced homeopathically, that is, by applying the very type of thing one wishes to be rid of. In this view, our pity and fear in response to tragedy purge us of the harmful effects of like emotions in ourselves.*

*Catharsis is also interpreted more intellectually as a way of clarifying one's knowledge of the proper objects of such emotions, that is, of what is genuinely*

---

<sup>6</sup> Rapp, Christof, "Aristotle's Rhetoric", (Spring 2022 Edition), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<sup>7</sup> (*hamartia*) although there is a now largely discarded tradition that takes *hamartia* to be a character flaw rather than a mistake.

*pitiable or fearful, and also as enhancing one's moral virtue by making one more disposed to respond appropriately to events that occur in the world. In all of these cases, catharsis can be seen as producing a type of pleasure that is the end of tragedy."*

A widely proposed reason given by Plato behind the enjoyment of the tragic aesthetic is that most people enjoy giving vent to emotions, and are bored by representations of people being intelligent and temperate in their behaviour<sup>8</sup>. Further, what we enjoy vicariously tends to become part of ourselves<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, the audience takes vicarious pleasure in indulging their appetites (example, for sex), along with the pains and pleasures 'of the soul' (such as anger) through viewing tragic themes; it works to strengthen desires that are usually brought under the control of reason<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Hobbes<sup>11</sup>, a psychological egoist, suggested that the pleasure derived in the paradox of tragedy is of the thank-God-it's-not-me variety: the suffering of the tragic hero makes spectators appreciate their own relative security and comfort, while Thomas Rymer<sup>12</sup> developed the concept of 'poetic justice', which requires that a plot must provide a clear moral lesson to the audience.

He held the view that pleasure arises from the moral appreciation of seeing poetic justice take place in tragic depictions- we can here take an example of Joan of Arc and her devastating story that inspired thousands of people to pledge their faith to Christianity. Despite the fact that she is depicted through history as a devout woman who lived a treacherously hard life and was executed for committing heresy- people are inspired by her story because of the poetic justice God dealt to the men who burned her. She turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War<sup>13</sup> against them.

There is a line by Dryden in the preface to Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*<sup>14</sup>, that explains this sentiment perfectly:

---

<sup>8</sup> The Republic, Plato

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Sorell, T.(2002). Hobbes, Thomas (1588–1679). In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Taylor and Francis.

<sup>12</sup> Rymer, T. (1693) *A Short View of Tragedy*, London: Richard Baldwin.

<sup>13</sup> Between October 1428 and May 1429, during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), the city of Orleans, France, was besieged by English forces. On May 8, 1429, Joan of Arc (1412-31), a teenage French peasant, successfully led a French force to break the siege.

<sup>14</sup> Bevington, D. (2021, September 5). *Troilus and Cressida*. Encyclopedia Britannica.



*"We lament not, but detest a wicked man, we are glad when we behold his crimes are punished, and that poetical justice is done upon him."*

We can also recognise some value in the observation of L'Abbé Du Bos<sup>15</sup> who stated that the effect of tragedy is that it allows us to be dislodged from listlessness, which in itself is quite pleasurable,

*"for me personally, tragedy can keep my attention because it serves to be a distraction from the listlessness; the mundanity of life. The fact that anything can happen to me at any time gives me an adrenaline rush that not even the best poetry can."*

### **Nietzsche on Tragedy in the *Birth of Tragedy***

Nietzsche's views on the 'paradox of tragedy' begin from his book *Twilight of Idols*, with a quote from Socrates, *"To live- that is a long time to be sick.."* After which he asks the audience a single question- "What is the value of life?"

During his time, and even today- a prudent life, a life lived in accordance with the rules of the Church or any religion with a codex was merely marketed (by the state) as the 'best' way to live. If you did not live the way they wanted, your life had no 'value' in their eyes- the eyes of the community, of a higher power.

He called this phenomenon as the corruption of reason<sup>16</sup>, which meant believing in or leading masses of people to believe in abstaining from a certain, few experiences (notably either causing immense pleasure to oneself, or immense pain to another) and consciously participating in a select few activities was the luxury religion afforded.

*"A race, a nation is judged by vice and the luxury to reason."*<sup>17</sup>

Which means that according to Nietzsche, a race is always judged by the activities they do despite religion, under the judgement of religion. How could anyone believe, he said, that this was the best way to live?

Instead, his book, *The Birth of Tragedy from The Spirit of Music*, can be seen as a sort of

---

<sup>15</sup> Young, James O. and Margaret Cameron, (Winter 2019 Edition), "Jean-Baptiste Du Bos", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche (1889), *Twilight of Idols (translated by R. J. Hollingdale)*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

commentary answering the question posed above.

In this play, by play of Greek tragedy, Nietzsche divided theatre into two halves- the Apollian and the Dionysian- where the Apollian performers practised religious symbolism, dream like states etc while the Dionysian chorus consisted only of revellers and ruler breakers- the absolute opposite of Apollo and all that his followers preached.

Through his in-depth analysis of the conflation between the Apollo and Dionysiac in tragic theatre, he claimed that when both aspects of tragic theatre coexisted on one stage- the spectator was pushed into a sort of 'existential crisis'<sup>18</sup> where in they were able to view the full spectrum of the human condition- the inescapable suffering and tragedy of life which allowed them to 'self affirm' their existence i.e give value to their existence. We will come back to this point a little further in the paper.

In Chapter 4 of *BoT*, Nietzsche says:

*"Apollo, as an ethical deity, demands moderation from his followers and, in order to maintain it, self-knowledge. And thus the admonition, 'know thyself' and 'nothing to excess' coexist with the aesthetic necessity of beauty, while hubris and excess are considered the truly hostile spirits of the non-Apolline realm..."*

But on the same page, right under this paragraph, he also says

*"The Apolline greek also saw the effect of the Dionysiac as Titanic and barbaric, unable to conceal from themselves the fact that they themselves were also inwardly akin to those fallen Titans and heroes. Indeed, they were forced to feel even more than that; that their entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, was based on a veiled substratum of suffering and knowledge, revealed to them once again by the Dionysiac."*

### **So, how did viewers of a simple Greek tragedy 'self affirm themselves'?**

Well, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche talked about how rather than existing in and commenting on our reality, the Dionysiac chorus exists in an idealized '*natural state*,' in which it observes '*natural beings*'. So basically, the Dionysiac influence- the influence of revellers and satyrs, music and intense emotions upon the Greek man of culture caused

---

<sup>18</sup> As part of this world, men must live as if there is nothing else beyond life. A failure to live, to take risks, is a failure to realize human potential. (Nietzsche, Tamari.com)

him to reject the petty appearances of his own reality, and accept the truth of nature as true reality.

Here, the truth of nature refers to the primordial truth offered by the Dionysian mind state, which is that suffering is at the root of human existence. In simpler words, what Nietzsche means to say is that the satyric chorus<sup>19</sup> undid the effects of culture on Greek men:

*"and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society, and, in general, the gulfs between man and man, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature."*

Now, although Dionysus instigates this process, Nietzsche claims that it cannot proceed without Apollo. For once, man enters this Dionysian understanding of the truth, he is in danger of losing himself there, and becomes unable to continue with his everyday reality because the intensity of the truth he has been confronted with seems impossible to act upon.

Art, he says, is designed to provide man with a veil of illusion that will allow action to continue, that is, in the form of the Apollonian dream-state. Therein, lies the redemptive quality of art and the importance of both deities in depicting a 'self affirming tragedy'.

For now we've seen how the combination of Apollo and Dionysus allow man to see the primordial truth- that is, according to Nietzsche, unchanging, eternal suffering that is out of our hands and dependent on some metaphysical phenomenon. Thus, we can now assume that experiencing a tragedy in art causes undesirable emotions like depression, anger, hopelessness to come to the surface.

So even if the viewer has managed to self affirm themselves, why do we feel a rush we need to chase after watching a tragic comedy?

**If the truth of life is truly eternal, unchanging suffering (according to Nietzsche) then why does the revelation of these ideas in the form of tragedy, give us pleasure or enable us to feel desirable emotions such as hope, euphoria etc?**

To explain this let us analyse a concept by Nietzsche called 'imaginary causes'.

---

<sup>19</sup> The original Greek chorus was allegedly made up of satyrs

*The Four Great Errors*<sup>20</sup> is a concise piece on causality that presents an alternative approach to considering the relationships between the cause of an event and the adoption of the ideas created by this event- as the original cause. According to Nietzsche, this phenomenon happens when an unprecedented event occurs it causes ideas in the mind that the subject mistakenly believes to be the original cause of the event, even though that is not the case.

In other words, this simply means that when confronted with an unreasonable, unknown, dangerous phenomenon- our first instinct is to try and relate it to something familiar, easy, calm.

So, when we watch a Greek tragedy where the Apollo and the Dionysus combine- we are faced with the fact that the suffering of life is inevitable, and out of our control. And the unfamiliarity of the unknown is deeply disturbing to us as individuals; so according to Nietzsche, we tend to shuffle through our memories to find an experience similar to the unexpected event, and conflate the cause of that memory with the cause of this unfamiliar experience.

What this means is that our reaction to a tragic event stems out of a misinterpretation of cause. Instead of reacting to the tragedy in front of us, we are so numb to the suffering exposed by the tragedy- our brains scramble to relate this terrible event to something less terrible we might have experienced before; and in reaching that conflation, that relation between the terrible we have never experienced and the terrible we got through, we feel a sense of accomplishment- even power, at the fact that we got through that event the first time, therefore it will not be impossible for us to get out of this event, this time too- causing you to feel emotions like hope and satisfaction.

The reason this is important is because once this conflation is complete, it brings such an immense sense of relief in the individual that it can be wrongly equated with truth. Nietzsche claims that this comes from a tendency of “some explanation is better than none”.

He attributes the confusion over the causes of an event to a basic human psychological need to eliminate the discomfort caused by the unknown, *“To trace something unknown back to something known,”* he writes, *“is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power.”*

---

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche (1889), *Twilight of Idols* (translated by R. J. Hollingdale)

Here I would like to bring one more aspect of his philosophy- Nietzsche's Will to Power. In the shortest summary ever, the will to power is basically a psychological insight, and this will is seemingly stronger than the will to survive. For example: martyrs are willing to die for a cause if they feel like associating themselves with that cause gives them greater power.

So what he's basically saying, is that our response to tragedy in art stems from the principle of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" in the sense that when you are confronted with a tragic event that may destroy your very being, you experience a false psychological rush that relates it to previous such events- events that you inevitably survived!

This allows you to feel a sense of 'power', and you chase this feeling in an attempt to get rid of oppressive ideas during a time when you realise that you might not necessarily have the means to get rid of it. Due to this, the viewers ultimately revalue suffering and come to see it is as necessary or even desirable.

### **Conclusion: The Necessity of Tragic Art**

*The Birth of Tragedy* tells the story of the birth, death, and subsequent re-birth of tragedy, which Nietzsche views through the lens of two different drives- the Apolline and the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, the Apolline represents the drive towards beauty, dreams, individuality, distinction, and order, while the Dionysian represents liberation from individuality, intoxication, joy, and the forgetting of the self. For him, Art at its best, had the potential to make life appear worth living—art could *justify* life.

This quote by Aaron Ridley grasps at the main line of thought behind Nietzsche's view on tragedy in art:

*"Tragedy engages more directly than any other art form with philosophy's own most fundamental question: How should one live? By depicting worlds in which things go wrong—in which chance and necessity play prominent and often devastating roles in the shaping of human lives—tragedy shows us aspects of a world that is, in reality, our world, the world in which we must live as best we can. In such a context, the question how to live acquires its proper urgency and complexity."*

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he praised the tragedy of ancient Greece for its ability to justify life in the face of suffering. For young Nietzsche, the importance of tragedy was contingent on the fact that it was a part of a particularly healthy and life affirming culture.

Ancient Greek tragedy was remarkable for Nietzsche because, he said, it was capable of providing its audience with metaphysical solace, as mentioned below:

*"the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable"*<sup>21</sup>;

or,

*"tragic myth in particular must convince us that even the ugly and disharmonious is an artistic game which the Will, in the eternal fullness of its delight, plays with itself."*<sup>22</sup>

In other words, tragedy does convince us that even in the face of the ugly and disharmonious, life is worth living.

Nietzsche also realised that humans have found many different ways to convince themselves to continue living, to persist in the face of inevitable suffering and meaninglessness. Some choose to believe in the idea that we can understand everything in the world through reason and the pursuit of scientific truth, or Socratism. Others, like him, preferred to indulge in pleasure and the beautiful harmony provided by the Apolline arts or even the metaphysical solace associated with Dionysian art.

Since Nietzsche believed that metaphysical solace was a form of illusion, it indicated that his point was not to argue for the reality of the metaphysical depths of Dionysian art. His point, rather, was that a belief in the existence of a metaphysical realm is an effective way of detaining us in this life, of making us go on living. That we do not appreciate tragedy simply because it provides us with momentary pleasure from listlessness or suppressed emotions, but because it allows us to justify life. We can take this to mean that despite attributing a cause to the 'paradox of tragedy'- tragic art is still a necessity.

Nietzsche's refrain throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, that *"only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified"*, was an expression of his belief

---

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, 1993, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Penguin Classics (translated by Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner).

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

that tragedy allowed the people of ancient Greece to find meaning in the face of suffering. He believed that Dionysian art created a state of ecstasy and intoxication caused by the breaking apart of our typical way of relating to the world. All of our usual worries, inhibitions, and concerns fall away as our individuality temporarily vanishes, and we connect with the Dionysiac "*primordial unity*"; which represents a state in which we no longer hold onto our limited, individualized perspective on the world.

This new Dionysian perspective forces us to "*recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction*". In spite of this realization, we do not "*freeze in horror*". This is because the perspective of the primordial unity shows us how to take joy in both creation as well as destruction, and due to the principle of imaginary cause.

To conclude, I would like to give the stage to Nietzsche, who compares the Dionysian primordial unity to "*a playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again.*" This child is, allegedly able to perceive "*the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight.*" Instead of focusing on the inevitable destruction, death, and pain of life, the perspective of the primordial unity convinces us that this pain is just one part of a greater whole that encompasses creation and destruction, joy and suffering.

And thus, tragic art becomes a necessity to living.

## References

1. Feagin, Susan L. 2010. *Greek tragedy to Plato*.
2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1889. *Twilight of the Idols*. N.p.: R. J. Hollingdale.
3. Nietzsche, 1993, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Penguin Classics (translated by Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner).
4. Aristotle (1969), *Aristotle's Poetics*
5. Plato, *The Republic*.

# FURNISHING THE IVORY TOWER: ON DARK ACADEMIA AND THE 'AESTHETIC' OF THE SCHOLARLY

Yusra Zainuddin

Lady Shri Ram College for Women

## Abstract

*When universities shut down and transitioned to the virtual mode of learning at the onset of the pandemic, an internet subculture rose to prominence as students found themselves away from classic learning environments. Enter academia: the 'aesthetic' of the scholarly and the intellectual. Characterized by an intense devotion to the learning process primarily through reading, writing and research, 'academia' as an 'aesthetic' provides the contextual meaning to unite a set of tropes, principles of fashion, a particular colour palette, visual philosophies, media properties and values of a lifestyle. This is gathered through mass consensus and subject to continual revision.*

*By focusing on the dominant strain of 'Dark Academia' this paper aims to examine the aesthetic, what it represents, its rise and the implications of its current popularity. This will be done through a brief reading of its literary origins and arguing that the disillusionment of a generation with the neoliberal university and the side-lining of the humanities manifest in the internet aesthetic. The paper concludes that although we need to pay attention to the need to reclaim beauty in the academy, one must be wary of how the nature of social media can mischaracterize the very beauty it claims to pursue.*

**Keywords:** *Academia Aesthetic, Dark Academia, The Secret History, Internet Aesthetics, Subcultures, Humanities.*



### **What is the 'Academia Aesthetic' ?**

The term 'aesthetic' is used in the digital world quite differently than it is by academic practitioners of aesthetic theory, although its definition remains inconsistent across both domains. In the former, it usually works as an adjective. According to Ana Quiring, "for a blog, person, or image to be "aesthetic" means that it cultivates attention to the sublime in everyday moments." The examples she provides for these include grainy film photographs, string lights, gloomy weather, houseplants, folded sweaters, and cream swirling into coffee. "These visuals appear within any number of specifically codified aesthetic categories" (ibid) where they can serve as a subcultural resource and a form of subcultural expression (McArthur 61). Youth subcultures have been studied to arise from an attempt to resolve generational problems that are collectively experienced as a result of the political economy or class structure in society. The aim is to establish an alternate identity free from the control of the above mentioned domains (Brake). This dissociation from the mainstream can be a powerful source of individuality.

'Academia' initially cropped up in the early 2010s in social media dominated by Generation Z, shortened as Gen Z – which according to the Pew Research Center is the generational cohort born between 1996 and 2006 – such as Pinterest, Tumblr, Tiktok and Instagram. The aesthetic's rise in popularity has been observed to be as fast as the growth of these platforms themselves which are recognisable by their immersive and addictive features (Grau et al. 10, 11) like bottomless, ever condensed and hyper- personalized feeds or 15-second looping videos set to music in the case of Tiktok (Montag et al.).

The academia aesthetic also has many overlapping thriving subtypes such as, light academia, dark academia, art academia, romantic academia, music academia, theatre academia and chaotic academia apart from hundreds of variations ranging from familiar to hyper-specific like goblincore or cottagecore (core stands for community of role players). Its style is highly structured and derivative (Quiring). Common aesthetic portrayals include simple and sophisticated dressing (think tweed, argyle sweaters, turtlenecks, plaid coats and wire rimmed glasses), architecture of New England Ivy League or Oxbridge campuses, worn satchels filled with classic novels, stacks of old leather-bound books, visits to museums, dusty libraries, coffee shops and art galleries, wax-sealed letters, melting candles and writing with ink pens.

Among these subcategories, dark academia has emerged as the single most popular becoming almost synonymous with the genre with over 1.5 million Instagram posts under the moniker and countless videos on Tiktok featuring the dark academia hashtag. It will be the primary focus of this paper.

### **The Dark Academia Aesthetic**

The dark academia aesthetic adds gothic tendencies to the academia aesthetic with a colour palette that is dominated by greys, browns and blacks, broody photos, existential poetry, philosophies concerning death, longing passion and the mystery of life.

The darkness in dark academia is both literal and figurative which might be surprising given that knowledge is most commonly associated with light, and ignorance with darkness with the common idiom “to be kept in the dark” meaning to deprive someone of knowledge. Dark academia romanticizes an esoteric liberal arts education especially in the classics, history, philosophy and languages like Latin, Greek and French for the exuded mystery, curiosity and diligence. For the community, the epitome of beauty is a kind of education that is exhilarating, all-consuming and poetic.

Amanda Taylor describes it as “a visual style inspired by certain works of fiction in which the characters subscribe to these main tenets: relentless pursuit of knowledge, violence and often murder, and a dedication to a specific kind of lifestyle that is cut off from the rest of the modern world.” The visuals are derived primarily from upper-class European cultures of the 19th century, Gothicism, and American Prep. The greatest influences are the epochs of Renaissance, Baroque and Romanticism.

Dark Academia's first appearance as a modern subculture was on Tumblr around 2015 where it began as a more intellectually inclined community and only gradually developed into a fully-fledged lifestyle concept (Zirngast). It owes its resurgence primarily to Tiktok and Gen Z's adoption of its visual appeals.

Followers of dark academia can be found revealing clips exploring autumnal campuses, offering fashion tips on styling thrifted sweaters, posing in moody study spaces with saggy furniture, listening to classical music and drinking copious amounts of coffee or collecting and sharing reading lists and images of homework in grids called ‘moodboards’. These depictions function as a ‘visual theory’ of the aesthetic and gain legibility as dark academia by their proximity to others of the kind (Quiring). According to the fandom page of dark academia, an online encyclopaedia of sorts, members of the community call

themselves ‘dark academics’ even if they may not necessarily have the appropriate credentials of a researcher or professor.

Most of the aesthetic images, professionally taken, are intended to inspire or serve as aspirational while others can be recreated in one’s daily life. The community celebrates pretentiousness by attributing historical glamour and emotional intensity to the ordinary in order to transform it into a fantasy at the centre of which is uninterrupted time and deep concentration rendered by the quietude of its signature campuses. One just has to shrug on a tweed blazer or pick up a copy of *Antigone* by Sophocles to participate. The aesthetic has thus served as an opportune entry point for those who have not been able to previously claim access to these idealised versions of student life.

Apart from glamorising elite spaces of learning, dark academia also includes elements of mystery, criminality and danger with murders and secret societies being recurring subjects. This can be owed to what is almost unanimously credited to be the foundational text of the dark academia universe, Donna Tartt’s 1992 novel, *The Secret History*, now claimed as a part of a genre of books called ‘dark academia thrillers’. Characters associated with this genre of fiction live secretive, decadent lifestyles often dedicated to the humanities and may commit intermittent acts of intense violence (Taylor).

### Literary Origins

A particular passage in *The Secret History* evokes the aesthetic:

*“It was a beautiful room, not an office at all, and much bigger than it looked from the outside—airy and white, with a high ceiling and a breeze fluttering in the starched curtains. In the corner, near a low bookshelf, was a big round table littered with teapots and Greek books, and there were flowers everywhere, roses and carnations and anemones, on his desk, on the table, in the windowsills. The roses were especially fragrant; their smell hung rich and heavy in the air, mingled with the smell of bergamot, and black China tea, and a faint inky scent of camphor. Breathing deep, I felt intoxicated. Everywhere I looked was something beautiful—Oriental rugs, porcelains, tiny paintings like jewels—a dazzle of fractured colour that struck me. (Tartt 27)”*

*The Secret History*, which is Tartt’s first novel, follows the murderous exploits of group of classics students studying under a mysterious professor of ancient Greek, Julian, at the quaint fictional university of Hampden in New England, a veiled version of Tartt’s alma mater, Bennington College.

"I hope we're all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?" asks the professor rhetorically for whom what one does in the classroom is "the most glorious kind of play" (33, 29).

The story is told through the eyes of Richard Papen, a working-class student from California, a veritable fish out of water, who is obsessed with the beauty of his surroundings and his rich and brilliant peers and who witnesses their gradual unraveling after a Dionysian Bacchanal inspired by Euripides goes horribly awry.

The book draws heavily on Edmund Burke's theory of the beautiful and the sublime. According to Burke, beauty is derived from the ideas of pleasure while the sublime can be terrifying and overwhelming. Beauty, he suggested, awakens our sympathy and an interest in society's welfare, while the sublime inspires us with a kind of reverence-stemming out of the instinct for self-preservation.

"Death is the mother of beauty," says one of Tartt's characters, the cold and prodigious Henry.

"And what is beauty?"

"Terror,"

"Well said," said Julian. "Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory (36)."

Death, danger, mysticism and twisted morality are replete in the works of writers like Byron, Shelley, and Wilde who are widely read in the dark academia canon. They all "explore ways to seek oblivion in their personal lives and self-absolution in their poetry, as they stretch towards some higher ideal of experience in order to eclipse death itself (Foulston)."

Films like *Dead Poets Society* also reverberate the existentialism that dark academia draws inspiration from. In the film, Robin William's character, John Keating, another intriguing and unorthodox yet wise teacher says the iconic lines "and medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for" which is one of the most logged screen captures in the dark academia community.

Gunner Taylor calls dark academia the “literary market category and dark academia the aesthetic as two instances of the same genre impulse”. He refers to McGurl’s conception of genre in which it is a response to the reader as a consumer. According to McGurl, “our desires are fundamentally generic in nature,” and consequently, “all fiction is genre fiction in that it caters to a generic desire.” In internet phenomena like dark academia, all cultural production is reduced to content that unites with the literary market under the common desire to gain access to a higher education previously exclusive to the higher classes.

### **Understanding the Appeal**

#### *Accessibility*

Dark academia is recognized for its accessibility. As a community that celebrates autodidacticism, it de-exceptionalizes elite scholastic environments. Although it seeks to emulate the status and sophistication of institutions whose lifestyle according to Sarah Burton “is woven from a preference towards whiteness, masculinity, and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism”, dark academics claim to subvert and democratize elitist spaces by accommodating gender-fluid aesthetics, other cultural markers like the hijab or non-western readings in an attempt to ‘decolonise’ dark academia. This is made possible because an ever-shifting internet genre evoking the academy is always more malleable than the academy itself.

By combining Great Books with more recent novels, dark academia represents celebrating the innate value of the western canon while at the same time deconstructing it. For the community, it is possible to do these activities simultaneously (Quiring). They indulge in and idealize the Western canon for a sense of legitimacy while critiquing and revising it.

The digital age has also accelerated the dissemination of information to an unprecedented level, democratising knowledge by both bringing a wider range of people into the exchange of ideas and rendering people more cognitively autonomous (Möbner and Philip 2,3).

#### *The Search for Beauty in the modern university*

Dark academia is emblematic of a generation’s complicated feelings about education especially in the humanities and sheds light on the failings of the academic world. The Pew Research Center tracks Gen Z to be the most well-educated generation yet and more likely to be enrolled in college or engaged in educational endeavours and less likely to be working than Millenials (cohort preceding Gen Z) as young-adults. They are therefore less

likely to be exposed to the practical parts of adulthood than previous generations. They are also considered digital natives (a term coined by Marc Prensky) who, born into an age of quick-access technology like computers and smartphones, are fundamentally wired to learn differently than those who have experiences of the non-digital world in valuing multimedia multitasking and real-time feedback (Prensky).

Dark academics constantly yearn for a 'beautiful' education that can often come at the expense of practicality. One has to then ponder as to when and how the experience of beauty, as a valid educational goal was so ubiquitously discarded within larger educational discourse in order to understand and sympathise with the motivations of the aesthetic that reveals a deep disillusionment with neoliberal models of education that have led to the corporatization of the university where employment conditions are terrible, resources overstretched and education intended to extract economic productivity amidst a growing climate of anti-intellectualism.

Against this background, it should be obvious why studying the humanities would be charged as economically useless and irrelevant in an age of burgeoning technology, adding to the perennial "crisis in the humanities" (Jay 8). With the constant existential threat regarding funding, tenure and enrolment looming over humanities departments in an atmosphere of discouragement, dark academia thus reevaluates the humanities in two ways: one, it preserves the spirit of humanistic study although it can also be argued that it does the same for the field itself and two, it brings attention to the subtler and softer loss of the pursuit of beauty in education that often gets left of out the conversation.

Adam Rosenblatt, a professor at Duke University writes, "Beauty is at the heart of the humanities: we spend time with our students gazing at slides of beautiful objects, helping them craft beautiful conclusions to their essays, deconstructing the influence of gender stereotypes and body politics upon notions of beauty, and analysing philosophical theories of aesthetic judgement. The experience of a great class discussion feels, to me, much closer to beauty than to the mere satisfaction of time used well in the pursuit of learning outcomes. But to name it as such in our current climate feels odd, even dangerous."

Eva Brann talks of the Great Books – "They are beautiful. It might be a crotchety or a canonical, a stylish or a crooked, a perfect or a blemished beauty, or—that's a possibility—the ugly beauty of mere sharp intelligence." They are the essence of liberal learning. For Brann, liberal education is devoid of the professional performativity of

schools where learning is mostly a detached spectatorship but an activity in which learners cooperate at an intimate distance and competition is always with the self.

Elaine Scarry in her book *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), which puts forward a case for the educational power of beauty, linking it with social justice, says, “to misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made (8). A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed.” The humanities are made up of beautiful things for Scarry – “beautiful poems, stories, paintings, sketches, sculpture, film, essays and debates” which draw people to them time and again (57).

### **The War on Beauty**

Beauty has in the past been understood as one of the highest aims of education. For Schiller, it fulfilled a core human need and he wrote in the second of his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* that ‘it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom.’ (9) Matthew Arnold argued that it was in beauty that the ‘human race finds its ideal.’ (47) Iris Murdoch argued that it should be at the base of any education in the virtues, citing Plato’s argument that beauty is the one spiritual quality that we love by instinct (85).

Scarry explains that the basic impulse underlying education is to continually place oneself in the path of beauty by submitting the self to other minds (teachers). Fundamental to beauty is the urge to ‘create a copy of itself’, to replicate and to inspire. Educational institutions by perpetuating beauty are supposed to give way to continual creation (8).

Late 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism dominated by Kantian aesthetics replaced an aesthetic of charm with an aesthetic of power and postmodernism, ever suspicious of institutionalised knowledge and critical of the owner of the ‘gaze’ and their relationship with ‘the gazed upon’ has called into question who can wield the evaluative concept of beauty. Scarry blames political complaints stemming from these sentiments for the banishment of beauty from the humanities (57).

Although this is in no way a comprehensive account of the humanities, aesthetic theory or the phenomenon of beauty, it is clear that ‘beauty’ in the educational context has had a definitive fall from grace. This paper aims to critically examine a generation’s unusual yet highly specific attempts at remediation by establishing an alternative educational space – unburdened from rote and mundane schoolwork to devote their time to a more authentic

type of learning for learning's sake – that has tangible impacts on conceptions of erudition, modes of learning and the formation of personal identity (Park and Kaye), exacerbated by a medium that enjoys unfettered influence in our times.

## Conclusion

The dangers of unrestricted pursuit of an aesthetic ideal are embedded within the very roots of dark academia.

*“Does such a thing as ‘the fatal flaw,’ that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs”*  
(Tartt 6).

Followers of dark academia should realise that it exists under the same framework it seeks to dissociate from – that of capitalist modernism and is therefore not immune from its hold. Social media is the perfect breeding ground for this morbid consumerist desire by fuelling the modern appetite for self-gratification and hedonism. Within the commotion of social media, it is easy to mistake the performance for the activity, glamour for beauty, the window-dressing for the central endeavour which is a powerful organising principle of teaching and learning. Because the ego is at the forefront, it cannot fulfil the hunger for transcendence and becomes a quasi-spiritual experience at best.

As Tartt herself says, ‘There is nothing wrong with the love of Beauty. But Beauty – unless she is wed to something more meaningful – is always superficial (474)’. Passion devoid of methodology and rigour is not an appropriate response to shortcomings in pedagogy. The reaction to the fate of the humanities should not be to caricaturize and sentimentalise the disciplines to the point of being unrecognisable. When one does this, all that ensues is a feel-good subject.

Beauty is critical. “Beauty has a built-in liability to self-correction and self-adjustment,” Scarry argues, pointing out that when we are wrong about beauty, and then realize our error, we experience it as both memorable and profoundly disconcerting (29). Beauty wasn't just going to deliver itself to us — it demanded that we think, feel, and find our way towards it.

Social influence and the pressure to conform to the group is unbelievably strong (Collin et al.). Aesthetic conformity of the kind in dark academia always comes at the risk of



inauthenticity that is antithetical to the creative power of beauty. The Internet and the Information Age has greatly undermined expertise by creating a disconnect between traditional scholarship, professionals and laypeople. It offers a shortcut to a perceived erudition where anyone can look up anything at any time (Nichols 107). When one can mimic intellectual accomplishment with little to no accountability measures in place, the fate of knowledge becomes precarious.

However, social media is here to stay, whether we like it or not. Popular YouTube figure R.C. Waldun has called dark academia the modern renaissance with the resurgence of the humanities and opines that it is only the surface manifestation of a renewed interest in classical literature and although overtly visual and superficial at first glance, a friendly invitation nevertheless for people to start reading Great Books again. He postulates that these texts will become ubiquitous over time as they become more prevalent in the consciousness of the public.

Although various community members and commentators of the dark academia aesthetic are enrolled in traditional educational institutions or full-fledged academics, the actual ratio of real-life students to just participants in the aesthetic remains unknown. Therefore, it can be hard to ascertain the kind of awakening that Waldun is optimistic about. Dark academia nevertheless, is a trend worth keeping one's eye on.

### **Works Cited**

Arnold, Matthew. "*Culture and Anarchy*". Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1960.

Brake, Michael. *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures (Routledge Revivals): Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll?* (1st ed.). Routledge, 1980.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203521489>

Brann, Eva. "Great Books and Small Colleges." *Renovatio*, 2017.  
[renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/great-books-and-small-colleges-brann](https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/great-books-and-small-colleges-brann)

Burke, Edmund. "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful." *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Columbia University Press, 1958.

Burton, Sarah. "TikTok's Dark Academia Trend Criticised for 'Whiteness!'" *The Guardian*, *Guardian News and Media*, 10 Feb. 2021,

[www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/feb/10/tik-toks-dark-academia-trend-criticised-for-whiteness](https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/feb/10/tik-toks-dark-academia-trend-criticised-for-whiteness).

Collin, Catherine et al., "How Strong Is the Urge Toward Social Conformity? Solomon Asch (1907–1996)" in *The Psychology Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained, Big Ideas* (London; New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2012).

"Dark Academia." Aesthetics Wiki, [aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark\\_Academia](https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia).

Dierksmeier, Claus. "Why Beauty is Indispensable to the Common Good", *Renovatio*, 2022. [renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/why-beauty-is-indispensable-to-common-good](https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/why-beauty-is-indispensable-to-common-good)

Dimock, Michael. "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 21 Apr. 2022, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/).

Foulston, Freddy. "Nostalgia and the Dark Academia Aesthetic". *Oxford Student*, 2021. [www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/11/06/nostalgia-and-the-dark-academia-aesthetic/](https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/11/06/nostalgia-and-the-dark-academia-aesthetic/)

Grau, Stacy, Susan Kleiser, and Laura Bright. "Exploring social media addiction among student Millennials." *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* (2019).

Jay, Paul. "The Humanities Crisis Then and Now. In: *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies*." Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014. [doi.org/10.1057/9781137398031\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137398031_2)

McArthur, J. A. "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 1, Jan. 2009, pp. 58–70, doi:[10.1177/0196859908325676](https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859908325676).

McGurl, Mark. "Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon." Verso, London, 2021, 14-15.

Möbner, Nicola, and Philip, Kitcher. "Knowledge, democracy, and the internet." *Minerva* 55.1 (2017): 1-24.

Montag, Christian, Haibo Yang, and Jon D. Elhai. "On the psychology of TikTok use: A first glimpse from empirical findings." *Frontiers in public health* 9 (2021): 62.

Murdoch, Iris. *"The Sovereignty of Good"*. Routledge, London, 1991.

Nichols, Tom. *"The Death of Expertise, The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters"*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Park, Chang Sup, and Barbara K. Kaye. "Smartphone and self-extension: Functionally, anthropomorphically, and ontologically extending self via the smartphone." *Mobile Media & Communication* 7.2 (2019): 215-231.

Prensky, Marc. *"Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning"*. Corwin Press, 2010.

Quiring, Ana. *What's Dark about Dark Academia*. Avidly, 2021, [avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2021/03/31/whats-dark-about-dark-academia/](https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2021/03/31/whats-dark-about-dark-academia/)

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. [doi.org/10.1515/9781400847358](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400847358)

Schiller, Friedrich. *"On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters"*. Oxford University Press, 1954.

Taylor, Amanda. *"Secret Histories: The Rise of Dark Academia"*. Diss. Bennington College, 2022.

Taylor, Gunner. *"Tweed Jackets and Class Consciousness"*. Post45, 2022, [post45.org/2022/03/tweed-jackets-and-class-consciousness/](https://post45.org/2022/03/tweed-jackets-and-class-consciousness/)

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden, Or, Life in the Woods*. London: J.M. Dent, 1908.

Waldun, R.C. "Why Dark Academia is the Modern Renaissance." YouTube, R.C. Waldun, 21 March 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoZ88tm3mSI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoZ88tm3mSI)

Weir, Peter. *Dead Poets Society*. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1989.

Zirngast, Lisa. *"Everything you need to know about the "Dark Academia Aesthetic"*

*"Trend"*. L'Officiel, 2021, [www.lofficiel.at/en/pop-culture/dark-academia-aesthetic](https://www.lofficiel.at/en/pop-culture/dark-academia-aesthetic)

# The Editorial Board



**Nanda H**

Editor-in-Chief

*"I don't know if it has something to do with the anarchist texts I have been consuming or the bewildering amounts of caffeine, but I seem to have witnessed a divine revelation." - Nanda*



**Yusra Zainuddin**

Editor-in-Chief

*"Meanwhile, the question is not whether we should 'lose ourselves' - since all do so in one way or another - but where we lose ourselves: in light or in darkness, in good dreams or in nightmares, in truth or in falsehood." - Gai Eaton*



**Aadrika Sominder**

Senior Editor

*"One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible, that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another."*

*-Descartes*



**Ananya Nivsarkar**

Editor

*"Standing there in our small shadows, we discuss the ways of the dead, their metaphysics, as if we were experts by osmosis, a certain knowledge absorbed."*

*- Leila Chatti*



## **Adhishri Aruman**

Sub- editor

*"Not thinking like a man,  
unapologetically!"*

- Adhishri



## **Vrinda Goswami**

Sub- editor

*"Research and writing are two sides  
of the same cassette,  
and Noesis is its muse."*

- Vrinda



## **Arushi Garg**

Member

*"Hope is a good thing,  
and a good thing never dies."*

- Andy Dufresne



## **Mannat Ahmed Khan**

Member

*"Words are eternal and some say, time  
is a social construct. The latter seems  
faulty and the first seems scary 2 days  
before the deadline. "-*

*(Mannat, 3:15 am)*



## **Fathima Afrin**

Member

*"You see there are still faint glimmers of  
civilization left in this barbaric slaughterhouse  
that was once known as humanity."*

*M. Gustave*