



JABBERWOCK
2023

About

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

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Editorial

“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*

The theme for last year’s issue of this enduring part of the English Department was, ironically, uncertainty. Having to grapple with existence on campus after more than half of our college lives were sacrificed to grainy video meets, uncertainty truly had been the defining mode of our lives. We say “had” because we took the mantle of Editors-in-Chief during a time when we’d become more familiar with the MLA format than with anything else, including where our classrooms were and who the person sitting beside us was, and we have tried to push everything to the wayside—all the doubt and confusion—to pretend like we know what we’re doing in order to do justice to the one constant in both of our lives through nearly three years of change. Thus, the theme of consumption. We believe that nothing could have encapsulated our lives better than the burning desire to collect as many experiences, people and things as we could in the little time we had in college. Consumption has seemed to define our social, cultural and economic patterns in a late-capitalist, post-pandemic age, with multiple resonances harkening not only to our past grapples with disease, but our present desires, relationships and our very being.

In 2020, 2021 and 2022, *Jabberwock* could not be printed for obvious reasons, and our authors and editors missed out on the opportunity to hold this labour of love in their hands. We were determined to change that. The two of us sprinted around campus and metro stations, asking a million people a billion questions to figure out and follow through with the process. We are proud and grateful to acknowledge that despite this year’s functioning being affected by the fatigue of readjusting, we have managed to restore this tradition.

Speaking of tradition, this issue of *Jabberwock* has seen a truly remarkable range. Authors across cities, colleges and disciplines have contributed to this issue. In the general section, our authors have dealt with subjects like gender, identity, spaces, power, agency, and symbolism among others. One of the papers examines Rabindranath Tagore’s environmentalism through the lens of affect. Another delves into the poetry of Asian-American author Kimiko Hahn, especially its feminist ethos through both a structural and spiritual connection to women writers from the East Asian tradition. Conversely, the paper on *The Rover* looks into male homosociality and its relation to the power dynamics endemic to Restoration society. Films like *Gaman*, *Chokher Bali* and *Rajkahini* are analysed for the representative potential of film as an archive of the city and state. Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* has received a semi-accidental tribute in our journal. One paper looks at the city of St. Petersburg as both setting and symbol, while another analyses sleep as appropriated by nascent capitalism and its implications. The split between action and thought is also examined in connection to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

Papers in the themed section include an analysis of Beat writing with relation to American consumer culture in the 50s and Walt Whitman as a cult figure and an examination of Chetan Bhagat’s fiction and how that subverts conventional definitions of popular fiction. Raskolnikov is looked at in terms of reader-response theory and identification. We also have an essay on queer representation in Thai Boys Love drama and the Netflix adaptation of *Heartstopper*. The creative pieces all connect to the theme of consumption in unique ways, from the literal act of

consuming, to being eaten away by emotion, and the viscosity of the body as well as the self.

Now that our tenure has come to an end, we would like to thank everyone who has helped us make it here. We are grateful to our editorial team for their promptness, patience and hard work. We would also like to express our thanks to Dipali, the Head of *Jabberwock Design*, and her team for helping us typeset the journal as well as Nooria and Tara, the Chief Editors of *Jabberwock Online*, for helping us edit the creative pieces. We express our gratitude to our Staff Advisors, Dr. Wafa Hamid and Dr. Madhu Grover, for their immense help, support and assurance. We would like to take a moment to acknowledge Dr. Madhu Grover's long and ever fruitful association with the journal as advisor and confidante, which will unfortunately be coming to an end with her retirement. We are also thankful to the faculty of the English Department for all of their contributions, especially Dr. Karuna Rajeev and Dr. Arti Minocha for conducting lectures on research methodology for us. Further, we would like to extend our thanks to our fellow students at the Department of English for their assistance and encouragement. We are grateful to Dr. Suman Sharma and the college administration for their help, especially with printing the journal. Lastly, many thanks to all the contributors for trusting us with their work.

“I can critique the bad; I can take the good, and I can add whatever I want.”

— Justine Larbalestier

We've trusted in our ability to critique, take, and add; to conquer multiple disappointments and negotiations and revel in our few achievements to bring you to this result of our faith in a continuing legacy and better future.

Signing off for the last time,

Arundhuti Das Gupta and Poulomi Deb

Editors-in-Chief

April 2023

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GENERAL CYCLE



Homosociality and Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Rover*

Ramsha Martin

Abstract

In recent years, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on homosociality as social bonds between same-sex individuals has been used to study the functioning of patriarchal modes. The tussle between female resistance and male homosocial bonds in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) is embodied by heroines, like Florinda, Hellena and Angellica, who attempt to assert their autonomy and agency against the machinations of the play's male characters but are ultimately left with limited possibilities for sexual liberation and the attainment of selfhood. This paper seeks to explore how male homosocial bonds strengthen hegemonic masculinity in the play through an examination of the sexual objectification of women in the play, and depictions of male competitiveness for individual gains as well as of men's emotional detachment from relationships.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, homosociality, Restoration drama, rebellious heroines, female resistance.

1. Introduction

Published in 1677, Aphra Behn's *The Rover* is a Restoration Drama which problematizes contemporary social and gender expectations unfolding in a carnivalesque setting.¹ Over the years, the libertine streak observed in the female characters of the play by critics has led to interpretations which range from an assertion of their agency to the availability of limited avenues for transgression provided to them in 17th century England. An examination of the trajectories of Hellena, Angellica and Florinda² as affected by the hegemonic masculine structures of the play can be carried out using the conception of the idea of male homosociality and its resulting influence on the patriarchal status quo. One of the interpretations which has evolved with Eve Sedgwick's idea of homosociality as espoused in her seminal work, *Between Men*, places emphasis on aspects of male bonding as an attempt to uphold unequal power structures and male privilege.³ As described by Hammarén and Johansson, hierarchical homosociality can be read in tandem with hegemonic masculinity, defined by Connell as the "maintenance of practices that institutionalize men's dominance over women" (185-186), based on how the former is a means to fuel and uphold the latter.⁴ Based on these readings of gender and their manifestations in society, Bird has provided a three-fold framework of hegemonic masculinity wherein men assert their dominance. Firstly, by sexually objectifying women to uphold male superiority. Secondly, by striving for competitive individuality against other men. Lastly, by emotionally detaching themselves from relationships.⁵ This paper will locate how each of these levels is manifested in *The Rover*, thereby encouraging a retrospective enquiry into the sexual politics as dictated by patriarchy and masculinity during the Restoration Era in England.

1 As argued by Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque setting in writing provides a space for temporary subversion and reversal of power structures. In the context of *The Rover*, for instance, the character of Hellena relies on masquerading herself as a gypsy to enter the Carnival and defy her father and brother's wish to join a nunnery. For more information on the carnivalesque, see *Rabelais and His World*. MIT Press, 1968

2. Women and Cavaliers in Restoration England

Hughes discusses how women gained “an unprecedented public presence and identity” (5) in Restoration England. As opposed to the Puritan era under Oliver Cromwell’s rule, which exercised moral censorship and deemed female sexuality sinful, plays in the Restoration period portrayed women and their sexuality in a more positive light, even as they catered to an elite audience drawn to illicit sex and comedy.⁶ Behn’s portrayal of the socio-political vices of her times is also bound within typical Restoration expectations. As highlighted by Shyamala A. Narayan, Behn’s play uses multiple elements related to Restoration comedy—the inclusion of young cavaliers in search of money which can only be obtained by using rich heiresses and the depiction of women who can exercise their power in choosing a husband, albeit with limited agency.⁷ For instance, the broke cavalier Willmore seeks licentious women like the noble Hellena and the wealthy Angellica as a means to secure his living.

3. Sexual Objectification of Women

In the first act, Hellena’s rebellion against patriarchal tyranny is juxtaposed with her attitude towards traditional standards of beauty. She refuses the path of the nunnery which was chosen for her by her brother, Don Pedro, and their father. Instead, she decides to find a suitable lover for herself in the Carnival, thereby indicating her spirit of rebellion and the carnivalesque setting of subversion. Hellena categorises herself as someone who is worthy of a “handsome proper fellow” based on her physical attractiveness and desires to employ these characteristics to “the best advantage” (Behn7). By calling herself “well shaped” and “clean limbed” (7), she affirms that women’s beauty dictates their autonomy in choosing a man. In this light, Parker⁸ links Hellena’s statement to the commercial politics of the time. By objectifying herself, Hellena limits her liberation by playing into patriarchal associations of desirable commodities and women. As argued by Vickers, a “(r)elationship so constructed involves an active buyer, an active seller, and a passive object for sale” (97). While Hellena’s statement could be read as a criticism of the politics of beauty in Behn’s time, this conventional portrayal also caters to a pleasure-seeking Restoration audience.

Furthermore, Florinda’s apparent agency is also moulded by the patriarchal society she lives in. She is valued according to standards of “beauty, birth and fortune” (Behn 6). Although Florinda believes that a woman’s worth is defined by these characteristics, she also claims to possess a rational soul. Thereby, she refuses to marry Don Antonio or Don Vincentio, who are deemed suitable grooms by her brother and father. Thereby, she refuses to marry Don Antonio or Don Vincentio, who are deemed suitable grooms by her brother and father. Florinda asserts that “I understand better” (Behn 6), making the audience aware that she is capable of choosing a husband for herself. However, even in this proto-feminist demand to be treated as a human rather than an object of marital exchange

2 While Hellena and Florinda are sisters and Spanish noblewomen who seek to live on their own terms, Angellica is a rich courtesan who prides herself on being desired by all men.

3 With Eve Sedgwick’s study of homosociality, three dominant interpretations have evolved over time. First, as mentioned above. Second, through a queer understanding of desire. Finally, through the study of female homosociality as different from male homosociality.

4 See Hammarén, N., and Johansson, T. “Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy.” *SAGE Open*, vol. 4, no.1, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013518057>. Accessed 22 July 2022.

5 See Bird, Sharon R. “Welcome to the Men’s Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996, pp. 120–32. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189829>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2022.

-ange, she conforms to the same variables of beauty and fortune through which her father and brother determine her value in the matrimonial market (Pacheco 325). Alluding to the demands of a marital arrangement and upholding traditional beauty standards for a woman to be deemed sexually attractive, Florinda's rebellion against male hegemony is undercut by her desire for a man who adheres to socially prescribed codes of masculinity.

Similarly, owing to her beauty, Angellica is subjected to the male gaze and seen as a commodity that can be exchanged between men. Her status as a sexually liberated courtesan is juxtaposed with the male characters reducing her to a mere object of desire, especially through her portrait which is hung outside her house to entice the audience and characters like Willmore.⁹ Although she enjoys a degree of independence and argues, "he that wishes to buy gives me more pride than he that gives my price can make pleasure" (Behn 29), the appropriation and objectification of her body upholds male superiority. Therefore, her self-blazoning validates female submission and renders her more vulnerable in a market of male desire. The theft of Angellica's portrait by Willmore acts as a metaphor for the consumption culture of 17th century England which stood for male conquest over female bodies as passive objects fit for sexual pleasure, or for sale in the marriage market, or both. Moreover, the paintings represent the masculine fetish of substituting objects for a woman's body (Diamond 532). Therefore, the paintings symbolising Angellica's sexual liberation also enable Willmore to satiate his sexual gratification through their theft. The commodification and male possession of the female image in the portrait's theft is rooted in the Restoration theatrical scene of Behn's time. During this period, the emerging presence of actresses in front of the public was marked by their sexual objectification, seduction and, sometimes, assault by the male audience (Hughes 29). The definition of male homosocial desire also extends to the theatrical hierarchy, wherein actresses worked at the mercy of powerful King and male patentee (Diamond 532). Therefore, during her introductory scenes itself, the actress playing Angellica advertises herself for sale not just to the male actor, but also the audience by metonymic extension.

4. Competitive Individuality

Even as they attempt to assert their autonomous status against male dominance, the female protagonists of the play emerge as sites for homosocial struggle between men. In the duel between Pedro and Belvile (Florinda's lover and Willmore's compatriot) disguised as Antonio (the Viceroy's son and Don Pedro's friend), the former justifies his fight as a means of protecting Florinda's honour instead of being motivated by his desire to possess Angellica. Even if he seeks to protect Florinda's image, he acts as a "dominant brother" who decides the form of male desire suitable for his sister (Szilagyi 445). Similarly, Willmore and Antonio draw their swords in Angellica's name and attempt to claim her for their own selves. Similarly, Willmore and Antonio draw their swords in Angellica's name and attempt to claim her for their own selves. In both these scenes, women's bodies emerge as territories for men to win and exert their control upon. As argued by Sedgwick, men assert their power through competition and exclusion:

6 For more information on theatre norms during Charles II's reign, see O'Donnell, Mary Ann. "Aphra Behn: The Documentary Record." *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 1-17.

7 See Narayan, Shyamala A. "The Rover as a Restoration Comedy." *Aphra Behn: The Rover*. Edited by Asha S. Kanwar and Anand Prakash, Worldview Publications, 2018, pp. 111-126.

8 See Parker, Patricia. "Rhetorics of Property: Exploration, Inventory, Blazon." *Routledge Revivals: Literary Fat Ladies*. Routledge, London, 2016, pp. 138-166

Within any status quo, even among the more privileged constituents of it, a competition of interests will lead to competing models and formulations of ideologically important social nodes. (86-7)

Gilligan sheds light on competitive individuality among men as a form of sustaining a hegemonic male homosocial group, wherein the struggle for power hinges not on cooperation, but distinction. In fact, the violators of this practice are at the risk of social disadvantage in male homosocial groups, unless they compete with other men.¹⁰ White argues that the licentious Willmore betrays the male group and their values for his benefit by fighting and wounding Antonio for a woman (10-13). On the other hand, Bird argues:

Masculinities that differ from the norm of hegemonic masculinity...are generally experienced as “private dissatisfactions” rather than foundations for questioning the social construction of gender...Hegemonic masculinity persists, therefore, despite individual departures from the hegemonic form. (123)

Borrowing from Bird’s analysis, it can be argued that Willmore’s act of individual resistance to a hegemonic norm does not challenge social and gender structures.

The male desire to conquer women through sexual violence and, at other times, protecting their honour, excludes female consent and participation. The medieval definition of rape changed from being a crime against male-owned property to a sexual crime violating female consent in early modern England (Rudolph 177). However, this consent is closely tied to the need for a woman to provide physical evidence of her violation, as well as the nature of her character as perceived by others. The man, deemed innocent until proven guilty, can claim the rape to be an act of consensual sex. Moreover, as Dagny Boebel points out:

In *The Rover*, virtually all of the male characters are rapists or potential rapists. Behn’s rapists are not aroused by the beauty of their victim; drunken, in the dark, they may not even see her very clearly. And rape, far from being an expression of uncontrollable sexual desire, may be an act of violence to punish, for the crime of being female, whatever woman happens to be in the rapist’s clutches. (64)

In each of the three attempts of rape against Florinda, she is directly or indirectly saved by another man, and partly, by her social status. The first time, Belvile protects her against the “licensed lust” (Behn 8) of common soldiers who were visiting Naples during the Carnival. Florinda compares the lust of socially inferior soldiers against Belvile’s chivalrous notion of manhood and emerges as a damsel in distress by virtue of his heroism. Her safety and virginity hinge on Belvile’s sudden appearance during every scene of sexual assault, which thereby safeguards the “lovely virgin’s heart” (Behn 13), and enables him to solely possess the same. As described by Pacheco, Belvile’s

9 Willmore is a pleasure-seeking and penniless rake. As described by Davis S. Berkeley, the rake is a stock character in Restoration drama. He is known for his sexual inconstancy and protest against loyal romantic pursuits. See Berkeley, David S. “The Penitent Rake in Restoration Comedy.” *Modern Philology*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1952, pp. 223-233. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/435324>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

10 This is because competing with other men offers them a platform to conceptualise one’s identity in terms of non-femininity and exaggerated notions of masculinity. See Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1993.

11 For a further discussion on the association between rape and chivalry, see Griffin, Susan. *Made from this Earth Selections from Her Writing*, 1967-1982. The Women’s Press, London, 1982.

chivalric response to assault and rape exists because Florinda's noble status makes her an important object to protect and conquer (323).¹¹ Applying Connell's idea of hegemony here, even this alternative framework of chivalric response to assault and rape exists because Florinda's noble status makes her an important object to protect and conquer (323).¹¹ Applying Connell's idea of hegemony here, even this alternative framework of chivalric masculinity protects men's interests as it perpetuates ideas of men's bravery and women's vulnerability.

In the second instance of potential rape in the play, Willmore finds Florinda alone in a garden at night and tries to force her into gratifying his sexual desires. Given Florinda's unchaperoned presence in the dimly lit outdoors as well as her scanty clothing, Willmore sees her as a sexually provocative woman despite her staunch resistance and threats to "cry murder, rape, or anything" (Behn 57). She is again saved by Belvile's command, "Villain, let go that lady!" (Behn 58). In this order, by referring to Willmore as the villain, Belvile implicitly grants himself the stature of a hero who here seeks to defend a high-born lady instead of a "cheap whore" (Behn 14), thereby valuing the safety of only the former. Willmore deems Florinda a vociferous and fussy harlot instead of a noble Christian woman and thereby demands that she "deny me [Willmore] nothing" (Behn 57). By seeing her conduct as evidence of provoking male desire, Willmore's justification is rooted in his unawareness of who Florinda is. It is almost as if she is reprimanded for attempting to evade the norms upheld for women with a lady-like status in the public sphere, dominated by notions of female passivity and violent masculinity, reinforcing the fact that her treatment is determined by her social standing.

Florinda's image as a vulnerable maiden heightens when she employs the argument of chastity and nobility against would-be rapists Blunt and Frederick. After being duped by Lucetta, Blunt is determined to take out his rage "in kindness and in beating" (Behn 84) on Florinda.¹² Attempting to gain Blunt's pity and save herself from sexual exploitation, Florinda emphasises the binary between chaste and sexually provocative women. She calls herself a "harmless virgin" (Behn 82) in contrast to harlots like Lucetta, or the "most infamous" (Behn 83) of her sex. In doing so, she implicitly suggests that it is okay to ruffle a harlot, but not a pious, virginal and noble woman like herself. As argued by Dagny Boebel:

Only a "woman of quality" a virginal daughter or a wife of a propertied man [like Florinda], is subject to rape [in Restoration England]. Other women [like Angellica] are common property. (66)

In this regard, despite the carnivalesque inversion which makes it hard to differentiate between highborn women and prostitutes, the play highlights their vulnerability. Limited expressions of female autonomy become excuses for men to flout homosocial codes of conduct in the masquerade setting. In addition, Florinda relies on her relationship with Belville to demand "more gentleness" (Behn 85) from Blunt and Frederick. Even in the absence of the heroic Belvile, his name is conjured to warn them from violating male homosocial bonds and sexually exploiting another man's love interest. It is ultimately Belvile's appearance at the scene of the crime which saves Florinda from male lust and rage.

Apart from the play's depiction of male homosociality, Hellena's competition with Angellica for Willmore's attention offers an alternative frame of reference to examine female homosocial bonds.¹³ By claiming that "I am as inconstant as you [Willmore]" (Behn 48) and, initially challenging the tyrannical family system, Hellena briefly emerges as a rover. However, her picaro streak is at odds with her virginal status and loyalty to a pleasure-seeking cavalier.¹⁴ Attracted to Willmore's "unconstant humour" (Behn 72), despite observing the licentious

rake's disloyalty and attraction towards Angellica, and desiring stability in her relationship with him, Hellena falsely dresses up as a male advocate to confess a wealthy, noble-born lady's love for Willmore in front of Angellica. Perhaps unknowingly, Hellena upholds the stereotypical representation of a jealous female lover in her limited resistance to patriarchal expectations. Apart from being a desired product among competitive cavaliers in the male homosocial world, Angellica, due to Hellena's brief and partial sense of rivalry, is expected to compete for Willmore's attention in the female homosocial realm as well. However, Angellica subverts the trope of the anguished lover by censuring the cavalier's transgressions. For instance, Hellena, at one point, disguises herself as a boy to distract Willmore from pursuing Angellica and talks about a mysterious wealthy lady who is in love with a licentious and inconstant gentleman (a thinly veiled allusion to herself and Willmore, respectively). Yet, this story elicits not jealousy out of Angellica but sympathy. Moreover, unlike Hellena, Angellica refuses to resort to petty competition with another woman or be as forgiving towards Willmore's inconstancy. Instead, she seeks her revenge against the "faithless man" (Behn 95) by holding a pistol against him and justifies her refusal to spare his life by referring to her sex's "public safety" (Behn 97) and her "own private injuries" (Behn 97). Angellica thereby rejects competing for male attention, unlike Hellena, and plays no role in upholding male homosocial bonds.

5. Men's Emotional Detachment to Relationships

In Behn's time, the expression of emotion was deemed to be feminine and, thus, weak in male homosocial groups. Furthermore, as is argued by Weston, the Restoration stage portrayed feminine values as "corrupting" (21) for female characters were seen as obstacles in the path of forging valuable male bonds. On the other hand, emotional detachment was linked to strength. Bird also sheds light on the tendency of male heterosocial relationships to be impersonal and emotionally shallow in order to uphold gender hierarchies and maintain individual masculinity. By clearly distinguishing themselves from overtly feminine qualities, men symbolically "depersonalize the oppression of women" (123). The male characters of *The Rover* also assert dominance by emotionally detaching themselves from romantic relationships with women. Owing to his licentious nature and bankruptcy, Willmore uses wealthy women for quenching his sexual desires while simultaneously seeking financial stability through them.¹⁵ In his first conversation with Hellena, he mentions his unwillingness to part with his scant money. Similarly, he chastises Angellica for being an expensive and sexually liberated courtesan by saying, "Though I admire you strangely for your beauty, / Yet I condemn your mind" (Behn 37). He concedes to his financial inability to afford Angellica and convinces her to give up her source of income and pledge loyalty to the amorous cavalier instead. In this light, Moretta's (Angellica's servant) description of the fate of whores as "trophies, which from believing fops we win, / Are spoils to those [Willmore] who cozen us again" (Behn 41) holds true.

12 Blunt is a country gentleman, who is friends with Belvile. On the other hand, Lucetta is a prostitute who dupes Blunt and steals his clothes and money.

13 While Sedgwick views female homosociality in terms of friendship between women, support for one another, and homosexual relations, Katherine Binhammer sees female bonds as shaped by the same social system which is dominated by men. For more information on Binhammer's idea of female homosociality see Binhammer, Katherine. Yet, this story elicits not jealousy out of Angellica but sympathy. "Female Homosociality and the Exchange of Men: Mary Robinson's Walsingham." *Women's Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2006, pp. 221-240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870600571851>. Accessed 27 Aug 2022.

14 For more critical information on Hellena as a female rover, see Dasgupta, Anannya. "Whether She Be of Quality or For Your Diversion: The Harlots and Ladies in *The Rover*." *Aphra Behn: The Rover*. Edited by Asha S. Kanwar and Anand Prakash, Worldview Publications, New Delhi, 2018, pp. 127-139.

Despite her rebellious claim to “have pride that yet surmounts my love” (Behn 39) and willingness to engage in a battle of wits with Willmore, Angellica ends up spending both her monetary resources and emotional labour on him. On the other hand, Willmore keeps emotionally distancing himself from their relationship as, to him, it is nothing more than a convenient arrangement for money and sex. The resolution of the play punishes Angellica for her sexual liberation. Despite confronting Willmore and the patriarchal structures he represents, Copeland argues that “she is not just isolated, but also left in limbo” (26). In this ambiguous closure, Angellica’s vulnerability is two-pronged. Firstly, even after readily opting for a loving relationship and spending her fortune on Willmore, she is unable to buy his loyalty and affection. After she fails in killing Willmore, she is missing from the play’s resolution which involves the marriage of Florinda and Belvile, and Hellena and Willmore, respectively. Secondly, this means that she, in all likelihood, returns to the pragmatic and commercial world of exchanging her body for the money of wealthy and exploitative men. Therefore, despite her resistance and assertion of identity, she ultimately remains ingrained within the corrupted commodity culture as an object for exchange.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Hellena and Florinda in the matrimonial market robs them of whatever little autonomy they enjoyed as single noblewomen. Behn attempts to challenge the rigid framework of arranged marriages by upholding the autonomy of Hellena and Florinda in selecting spouses of their choice. However, even this potentially subversive resolution is riddled with contradictions. Catherine Belsey delineates and differentiates between two different conceptions of marriage accepted during this time. In the absolutist concept, women are seen as objects of exchange for continuing dynasties. On the other hand, the liberal concept hinges on the woman’s freedom to choose her husband (192-200). Ultimately, in the play, rebellion against the former results in willful acceptance of the latter by the two heroines. Multiple Restoration comedies portray this sort of rebellion against the sexual politics of “Stuart hegemony” (Canfield 31), wherein any resistance to marriage upholds the patriarchal system and ends up in marriage after all Belvile’s marriage to Florinda is, in fact, preceded by her immediate forgiveness towards her sexual harassers like Willmore and Frederick. She permits Willmore to “command” (Behn 91) her anything, and vows to reconcile with Frederick on the condition that he marries a maid “whose fortune [...] will not be unwelcome to you” (Behn 92). Therefore, abiding by in Connell’s understanding of hegemony as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (77), ideas of male superiority are so subtly and deeply entrenched in society that resistance constitutes no challenge to the dominant power structures in play. In this situation, Florinda not only encourages her almost-rapist to marry wealthy women, but also suggests that all is to be forgiven in the spirit of conjugal bliss.

The only characters who enjoy a happy ending through this structure of marriage are the bankrupt cavaliers like Willmore and Belville. According to the law of coverture, a wife’s legal existence in 17th century England was defined by her husband. A married woman lost any rights to individually obtain credit or file suit on her property as it now belonged to her husband.¹⁶ Levi-Strauss sheds light on the idea of marriage as primarily an exchange between men, who reduce women to objects in this transaction.¹⁷ Looking at marriage as an economic institution enables men to emotionally detach themselves from as well as sustain their power by feeding on the social and legal autonomy of their wives. This is perfectly summed up by Willmore confessing that, for him,

15 Zook highlights that during Cromwell’s Republican regime, multiple cavaliers like Willmore and Belville had their properties confiscated as a result of pledging their allegiance to the exiled Charles II. Behn’s works, like *The Complaint of the Poor Cavaliers* (1707) and *The Rover*, have captured their plight. For more information on the cavaliers, see Zook, Melinda S. “The political poetry of Aphra Behn.” *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, edited by Derek Hughes and Janet Todd, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 46-67.

“Marriage is as certain a bane to love as lending money is to friendship. I’ll neither ask nor give a vow” (Behn 101). Therefore, this Restoration drama ultimately transfers power from somewhat autonomous women to formerly financially deprived men.

6. Conclusion

The three metrics described by Bird to study male homosociality in tandem with hegemonic masculinity— sexual objectification of women, competition with other men, and emotional detachment from relationships— apply to *The Rover*’s gender politics. Knowingly and unknowingly, the heroines’ resistance to patriarchal strategies is bound by larger power structures reiterated by the male characters. Even in their attempts at gaining sexual autonomy or negotiating with the matrimonial market on their own terms, Angellica, Hellena and Florinda meet subjective and conventional resolutions which yield no absolute emancipation from male tyranny and violence. Despite making a name for herself in the male-dominated world of playwrights, Behn rightly has a “limited capacity to imagine a distinctly female subjectivity” (Pacheco 342). Her play reveals how even instances of personal tussle against hegemonic masculinity are either overshadowed by male characters who meet relatively idyllic fates, or strengthen the status quo through seemingly revolutionary, alternative ideas of manhood. Moreover, the journey undertaken by them shows how diverse manifestations of masculinity and homosocial bonds seek to protect male privilege and foundations above all contestations. Therefore, this retrospective study of the play through contemporary and constantly evolving notions of masculinity suggests how even in the absence of clear definitions, power politics have remained entrenched in societies and in resulting literature.

16 The common law viewed a married woman as a femme couverte. For more information on the law of coverture, see Erickson, Amy Louise. *Women and Property in Early Modern England*. Routledge, 2002 and Laurence, Anne. *Women in England: 1500-1760* Weidenfeld Nicolson, New York, 1994.

17 See Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Beacon Press, 1971.

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Archival City as a Paradox: The Karbala Synecdoche in Muzaffar Ali's *Gaman* (1978)

Anusha Khan

Abstract

This paper argues that Muzaffar Ali's directorial debut *Gaman* (1978) renders the metropolis a site of paradoxes and contradictions: longing is clouded by fear, dreams are confined to claustrophobic urban spaces, hopes are branded by despair. The paper takes examples from the film supplemented by other texts to deconstruct the mythic delusion attached to the city of Bombay. The paper works with the backdrop of the tragedy of Karbala and concludes how *Gaman* transforms the metropolis into the modern-day Karbala. Furthermore, the lyrics of Shahryar and Makhdoom Mohiuddin included in the film acquire an intrinsic role since both the lyricists eloquently capture what constitutes diasporic literature - here, a migrant worker's exile in an alien city.

Keywords: Diaspora, memory, archive, Karbala, anti-Epic.

1. Introduction

Gaman (1978) by Muzaffar Ali intricately caricatures a diasporic narrative of migration, alienation and the loss of selfhood. Through the interstitial cinematography of *Gaman* which is a complex blend of documentary and fiction, the director weaves together several narratives that get muffled by the cacophonous glamour of the ambitious and the desirous city; here, Bombay. The music by Jaidev, lyrics by Shahryar and Makhdoom Mohiuddin and the voices of Chhaya Ganguly, Suresh Wadkar, Hariharan and Hira Devi Mishra capture the pathos of a migrant worker stuck in between a city utterly unknown to him and his native land.

Derived from the Greek word *archeion*, meaning legislation, an archive is different from a repository since the former is not merely a storehouse of information. It also holds narratorial power. When we attempt to contextualise the term with regard to cinema, we can infer that films act as an archive of the city, which inadvertently becomes a space replete with paradoxes and contradictions. Muzaffar Ali's *Gaman* released in 1978 therefore becomes indispensable when we try to understand the palimpsest city as an archive.

2. The Journey

Due to a paucity of work in his village, Kotwara (Uttar Pradesh), a naive Ghulam leaves behind his wife and his ailing mother in search of employment in Bombay, the hub of opportunities. As the film begins, the camera adopts a panoramic lens in order to provide us with a holistic view of the simplicity and serenity of the village. Muzaffar Ali later contrasts this panoramic view with that of Bombay, dotted with monuments and *chawls*¹, roads packed with buses and the city's populace blinded by its enigma. As Muzaffar Ali delves into showcasing the village to the viewers, the lines "*Aaja sanwariya tohe garva laga lun / raske bhare tore nain sanwariya*"² (*Gaman* 00:41) plays in the background. The song, aside from several other themes like longing and despair, throws light on the all-encompassing calibre of the hinterland which is later contrasted with the glamorous city, Bombay. Muzaffar Ali skillfully crafts this contrast by focusing his camera's lens on the open spaces like the sky, wilderness, and the

interconnectedness of the people in Kotwara juxtaposed with the overarching architecture backed with historical complexities. The film is replete with political fervour and social commentary. For instance, we see a group of local men sitting together and discussing the rise in diesel price and that their wages will be cut (*Gaman* 09:04). The scene ends with the men resolving that they shall refuse to work if their wages are cut. This is also the first time we meet Ghulam's friend Lallulal who is aspiring to go to Bombay for work and suggests that others do the same. The prospect of going to Bombay thereby becomes quite akin to the "American Dream"³ (Roychoudhury "Muzaffar Ali") and similarly gets shattered.

3. The Karbala Synecdoche

Although the references to Karbala are abundant in the film, the first reference we get is when Ghulam informs his wife and mother that his friend, Lallulal is leaving tomorrow and his wife, Khairun, asks "To Bombay?" and Ghulam replies, "No, Karbala battle-field" (*Gaman* 12:57-13:04). To grapple with this reference, we need to go back in time. Muharram is the first month in the Islamic calendar and is a month of mourning. It marks the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussain Ibn Ali.

The unique metaphorical significance that it holds sets it apart from other events in the entire Muslim history for the sufferings that the grandson of the Holy Prophet with a handful of his companions were subjected to, and the sacrifice the martyrs of Karbala made and upheld the cause of truth and righteousness. (Kamran "The Eternal Metaphor")

What culminated into the Battle of Karbala was the refusal of those who were against the oppressive and totalitarian regime of Yazid⁴ as the caliph. Among those who opposed it was Imam Hussain. As the battle commenced, his small army was denied even basic survival requirements like water. The atrocities of the battle did not even spare the life of his young son, Ali Asghar. On the tenth day of Muharram, Ashura, Hussein Ibn Ali was martyred. The tragedy of Karbala therefore becomes a cautionary tale to all generations. Despite Yazid's apparent victory, history renders Hussain Ibn Ali triumphant because of his unshakeable belief in righteousness as well as his refusal to bow in the face of unjust power and oppression.

Apart from giving rise to the elegiac poetic forms to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali and his family, called *Noha* and *marsiya*⁵ in Arabic, Persian and Urdu Literature, the metaphor of Karbala has held importance in English Literature as well. For instance, the poetic oeuvre of the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry", explains that "Karbala, rather than being associated with only the Shi'a community and faith

1 A multi-floored, congested housing system usually associated with Bombay and its colonial past. Chawls came into existence during the establishment of East India Company to accommodate the myriad of workers coming to Bombay, EIC's commercial hub, in search of work.

2 Trans. "Come my beloved/ I long for your embrace/ your eyes are filled with love" (Translations of lyrics and dialogues have been taken from the film subtitles unless mentioned otherwise.)

3 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the American Dream is "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative." However, over the course of time, this American Dream began to shed its ideals by placing material success over core human values. Although the Dream aimed at emphasising success to all irrespective of their social and political position in society, ultimately, owing to its material nature, it ended up accentuating the hierarchical demarcations, highly determined by class that marked the American society.

turns into a symbol of agency, of commemoration and mourning in the face of hardship” (262-65). This metaphor also runs in Muzaffar Ali’s *Gaman*. Time and again, the director inserts sequences of people mourning during Muharram in the film, alluding to the oppression of Thakur in the village and the poverty imposed by socio-political forces, which compels Ghulam to leave behind his humble belongings. As the seventh day of Muharram approaches, the setting in *Gaman* shifts from Bombay to Kotwara and focuses on Khairun and Ghulam’s ailing mother in their solitude, pining for Ghulam, with the following Noha in the background:

Ro ro ke puuchti hai hai/ Bano shah e zameen se / Ladiyal Jawaan ki maiyat kis tarah laaien ran se / Kasim chale jo ran ko/ Kubra tadap ke boli/ kis tarah sabr hoga ek raat ki dulhan se / Jhoola jo khaali dekha ro kar Sakeena boli/ Amma humaare Asghar/ Ab tak na aaien ran se⁶ (Gaman 53:55 - 56:05)

The tragedy of Karbala finds itself in the nameless deaths that mark the city of Bombay. In their essay called “Gangland Bombay”, Ranjini Mazumdar writes of the city and the mundane occurrences of violence that mark a city life. Although Mazumdar derives examples from gangster films like *Satya* (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 1998), *Company* (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 2002) and *Parinda* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989), a similar theme of urban detritus, alienation and banal violence runs in Muzaffar Ali’s *Gaman* as well. When an unknown man dies from a train accident (*Gaman* 41:59), Ghulam becomes perturbed. Muzaffar Ali’s storytelling makes the utter heedlessness of the passengers conspicuous by focusing on their lack of sympathy for the dead human. The sudden demise of the unknown man, instead of evoking sympathy for a fellow human being amongst the train passengers, reveals how mechanical work has transformed their priorities. Instead of enquiring who that dead man is, what concerns them more is the fact that they are getting late. On this, Ghulam remarks, “I feel sick...a man is killed and everyone thinks of being late” (42:23). Lallulal justifies this by saying “people die like this every day. They are used to it” (42:30). The death of a fellow taxi driver “4143”⁷ Ramprasad, (1:00:38) fills Ghulam with existential angst, making him realise the Sisyphean⁸ quality of the life he had become a part of: “Ramprasad, after driving a taxi for thirty years has passed away. After sometime I too will be driving a taxi. For how long?” (1:04:03) The lyrics by the Urdu modernist poet Sharyar: “*Vo kaun tha, vo kahaan ka tha, kya hua tha use/Suna hai aaj koi shakhs Marr gaya yaaron*”⁹ (*Gaman* 1:03:03) further emphasizes this absurdity, and the unfocused camera acts as a premonition that anyone from the crowd could be next to depart. In an interview published in the *Mumbai Mirror*, the director elucidates:

Gaman is about displacement. In scientific terms, it is the adding of an external element and thereby the replacement of the original organic element. I saw the emergence of a Gaman-like world in Bombay when I moved there in 1971: The influx of people from all over to displace the original character of the city. The making of a metropolis is the unmaking of a place. Spaces are threatened in layers, year after year and

4 Yazid ibn Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan or Yazid I was the Umayyad Caliphate’s second caliph from April 680 till November 683.

5 The poetic forms, Noha and Marsiya, are deeply rooted in Islamic history. They can be understood as an elegy, that is, a type of poetry that mourns or laments the dead. The sub-parts of Marsiya are called Noha and Soaz. Marsiya generally consists of six-line units, with a rhyming quatrain, and a couplet on a different rhyme. It is characterized by six-line verses in an AA, AA and BB rhyme scheme. They are traditionally either recited by Marsiya-Khwans or sung by a Marsiya-Soz (Safvi, The art of marsiya writing and reciting).

6 Trans. “As she weeps/ Bano asks Husain/ How could you bring the body of your young son/ from the battle-field? / As Kasim left for battle/ Kubra trembled and said/ How can a bride of one night bear this torment?/ as she saw the empty cradle/ Sakeena cried and asked/ Mother, our infant Asghar/ has not returned from the battle-field!

each year changing the aesthetics of an urban cityscape, rendering the earlier out of date. The enormity of this tragedy was rendering people faceless (“In the Wake of Gaman”).

4. The Redefining of Relationships

The film commences with Ghulam leaving behind his home and relationships and stepping into the “Bombay Dream”¹⁰ (Mazumdar 157). The location and re-location of Ghulam, the desire and inability to belong and him sacrificing his love for Khairun and his mother transforms Bombay into a modern-day Karbala which denies its pulpits, even the right to survival. In *Gaman*, the migrants inhabiting an alien city are constantly faced with the questions of sustenance, clean water, food and accommodation. The only acquaintance of Ghulam in Bombay is Lallulal, who believes in leaving his village and going to Bombay to earn a living and live a better life, and inspires others to do the same. Whilst the former is timid and unsure of what he wants from life, the latter is portrayed as his opposite. For Lallulal, relationships have come to be defined within the cartography of the city. We barely get to know about his family. The domestic life of his beloved Yashodhara reveals yet another facet of a relationship. As a woman who is relatively self-sufficient in her family and capable of love, she is viewed as a commodity by her brother, Vasu, who wants her to go to Dubai to earn money for their selfish needs. Her relationship with Lallulal irks him since they both are desirous of their own home and a family independently.

Through the effective use of spatiality, Muzaffar Ali successfully circumstantiates the complexities that abound love in a capitalist regime and the corrosion of human relations. The portrayal of the vast sky and the expansive sea is juxtaposed with the dilapidated shack, destined to be destroyed by the Municipal Cooperation, shared by Lallulal and Ghulam. Whilst in the former setting, Lallulal and Yashodhara are openly able to express their emotions, in the latter setting, the lovers seem uncomfortably boxed in by the walls of the shack. The focus here is not on an isolated individual, but on an individual operating within a society. This becomes apparent in *Gaman* when the carnivalesque¹¹ essence of the celebration of a wedding (*Gaman* 1:28:06) is portrayed in conjunction with the mourning of Muharram and a protest led by the communists chanting *Inquilab Zindabad*¹², and all the events culminate into the colour red. As a progressive poet, Faiz Ahmed elaborates:

First a man writes by inspecting his own self about his emotions. As his field of vision broadens, he realises that man’s self is an insignificant thing and not worth writing about.

What should be looked at is the experience of an individual belonging to humanity or belonging to a nation (Ahmed qtd. in Hashmi 105).

7 Throughout the movie, Ramprasad is addressed by his taxi number “4143”.

8 The myth literally refers to a Greek character named Sisyphus who was condemned by Hades (the God of the dead) for cheating death twice. As his punishment, he was compelled to push a giant boulder up a hill. But every time he reached the top, the boulder would tumble back to the ground and he had to start pushing the boulder from the bottom again, referring to the circularity of never-ending labour and suffering of the character. In his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, the French philosopher Albert Camus perceives Sisyphus as an absurdist hero and through this myth, gives an analogical explanation of the eternity of human suffering and absurd reality. For Camus, the awareness acceded by Sisyphus of the Absurd reality and his ability to face it “makes him stronger than his rock” (Camus 117).

9 Trans. “Who was he? Where was he from? What happened to him? / A man has died, we hear my friends”

10 Mazumdar here equates the American Dream to the Bombay Dream as she writes, “[e]ndless struggle with no hope of a better future - this is the ultimate counterface to the “Bombay Dream”” (157).

As we reach the scenes preceding the climax, the last song of *Gaman* penned by Makhdoom Mohiuddin and sung by Chhaya Ganguli fills the audiences with melancholy as Khairun pines for her husband and Ghulam drives his taxi through the dark night in Bombay:

aap ki yaad aati rahi raat bhar
*chashm-e-nam muskuraati rahi raat bhar*¹³ (*Gaman* 1:37:31)

At the same time, we see Yashodhara and Lallulal in the beach trying to compromise with life (*Gaman* 1:41:56). No song plays for them. As they approach their vehicle, Lallulal is attacked by Yashodhra's brother and his agent. The cinematography defies the voyeurism usually attached to violence in contemporary cinema. In most of what comprises the Bollywood cinematic oeuvre, we often find violence acquiring a sense of aestheticism, thereby transforming the spectators into voyeurs. On the contrary to this precedent, Lallulal's assassination is implied through the screams of Yashodhra and the scene immediately cuts to the next morning when Ghulam, oblivious of Lallulal's death, approaches the site of violence. The close-up shot of Ghulam, and the wide shot of those gathered and rendered faceless reveals the utter banality of the accident. The casual death of a train passenger in the beginning, the death of 4143, and now Lallulal, leaves Ghulam in shambles and he decides to leave. Muzaffar Ali's exploration of various relationships in *Gaman* — friendships, romantic relationships and familial relationships alike — tell us how love and human emotions perish in the face of individualism and violence that marks a modern-day city.

5. *Gaman* as an Anti-Epic

Much like Martin Scorsese's taxi driven by Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Abbas Kiarostami's car driven by Mr. Badil in *Taste of Cherry* (1997), Muzaffar Ali's taxi driven by Lallulal, Ramprasad and Ghulam in *Gaman* (1978) acquires Foucauldian heterotopic idiosyncrasies¹⁴ as the taxi becomes an alternative world. The yellow taxi in *Gaman* comes to define the space occupied by Ghulam in the new city and ends up controlling his existence in Bombay and governing his social life. When Ghulam arrives in Bombay, Lallulal takes him around the city (*Gaman* 36:06) in his taxi to show the new migrant the Gateway of India, Central Library, Ballard Street and so on. On reaching the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly called Victoria Terminus or VT Station (37:59), Lallulal remarks that "a visitor's first step in Bombay is either here or Bombay Central" (38:06). Ghulam, utterly taken aback by its splendour, says "it looks grand from outside" (38:11). To this Lallulal retorts, "everything looks grand from outside. Inside, it's all topsy-turvy" (38:12). For Graeme Gilloch, author of *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996):

. . .while the city's proud monuments most clearly articulate the glorification of history, in their 'afterlife', these same structures come to unmask the modern metropolis as the locus of mythic delusion. (73)

11 Carnavalesque is a concept propounded by the Russian scholar and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. It originated from the idea of a "carnival" as a literary mode which leads to destabilization and seeks to subvert and reverse power structures of an otherwise tightly organised social order.

12 Trans. "Long Live Revolution". The slogan was originally by Hasrat Mohani, a renowned Urdu poet known for his prominent role in the Indian independence movement. The slogan was later popularised by Bhagat Singh. Since then, the slogan has been used by activists, irrespective of their political leanings, to bring about socio-political changes in the society.

Throughout the scene, we see history as it is known by Lallulal, a migrant taxi driver. For instance, he calls his shack “Taj Mahal no. 1” (34:44) and explains that “the second Taj Mahal is in Agra, the one Shah Jahan built for his beloved” (34:47) and refers to the Taj Hotel as “the Taj Mahal no. 3 of Bombay” (36:16). At this point, it is important to note that “the monument is a deeply contradictory site, often presenting itself as the concentration of a city’s historicity” (Mazumdar 168). One is inevitably reminded of Sahir Ludhianvi’s nazm *Taj Mahal*:

taaj tere liye ik maz.har-e-ulfat hī sahī
tujh ko is vādi-e-rañgīñ se aqīdat hī sahī
merī mahbūb kahīñ aur milā kar mujh se
 ...
ik shahanshāh ne daulat kā sahārā le kar
ham gharīboñ kī mohabbat kā uDāyā hai mazāq
merī mahbūb kahīñ aur milā kar mujh se
 (qtd. in Rekhta.org)

(The Taj, mayhap, to you may seem, a mark of love supreme
 You may hold this beauteous vale in great esteem;
 Yet, my love, meet me hence at some other place!

...
 An emperor on the strength of wealth, Has played with us a cruel joke.
 Meet me hence, my love, at some other place.)
 (Kanda 373)

Abrams and Harpham trace the essential characteristics of an epic; it is a:

... long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style and entered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose action depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race. (109)

Along these lines, Muzaffar Ali’s deliberate defiance of the cinematic scopophilia¹⁵ moves Ghulam away from the archetypal heroic attributions, as the director renders all of his characters faceless, thereby producing a universal appeal. The Karbala synecdoche raises Ghulam’s narrative to what we may call an anti-epic. Post the demise of Lallulal and Khairun longing for Ghulam, *Gaman*’s denouement suggests that Ghulam “is now an inmate in this city-sized prison, where entry [*Agaman*] is possible but exit [*Gaman*] is unheard of” (Roychoudhury “Sands of Time”). He will continue to strive in the oppressive circumstances of the metropolis in order to survive. The Karbala synecdoche unravels itself in Ghulam’s unflinching courage to fight the exploitative forces of Bombay despite being constantly overthrown by it. Having entered into the Bombay Dream, Ghulam involuntarily moves

13 Trans. “Memories of you haunted me all night / Tear filled eyes glistened all night”

14 Heterotopia is a concept given by the French Philosopher Michel Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” in which he talks about how the concept of space have evolved over time, and how it determines the socio-political existence of a person. Therefore, the term heterotopia means a world within a world which seems natural but nevertheless controls the existence of an individual. Prisons and mental institutions are an example of a heterotopic world as these institutions become a world on their own by regulating behaviour of individuals and exercising power on those who become a part of it. In a similar way, here, in Muzaffar Ali’s *Gaman*, the taxi becomes the “other” world for Ghulam as it becomes a witness to the protagonist’s circumstances.

into an exile within his homeland.

As Ghulam drives his taxi through the city, the idea of the city as a palimpsest starts unfolding. When later in the film Ghulam becomes a taxi driver, the camera adopts a realistic¹⁶ lens, the aerial view of the city is devoid of breath and the *mise-en-scène* becomes claustrophobic. Through Ghulam's taxi, Muzaffar Ali explores life of a city and concomitantly its psychological impact on a person. Vicariously, through the passengers and their conversations, the film reveals what Mazumdar calls the "underworld"¹⁷ of the metropolis. The inherent class differences, palpable in the architecture of different localities breeding vices, are revealed. The aerial shots of the city are combined with a sense of vertigo and the *chawls* and packed bazaars stand in stark contrast to the dreams that Bombay has to offer.

In the French realist novelist Honoré de Balzac's text *Old Man Goriot*, originally published in the year 1835, the boarding house housing people from all walks of life becomes a microcosmic portrayal of Paris, that is, a glamorous city is portrayed in contrast with the decaying boarding house and human existence. This is what marked the 19th century Realist novels, the concept of "interiority", that is, through a "deep gaze"¹⁸ we get into the hearts and minds of the characters. Much like Balzac and his scientific realism, Muzaffar Ali also grapples with the multiplicity of the city and its ambivalent nature. Furthermore, the lyrics written by Shahryar work towards defining the everyday experience of the city. Notice the following lyrics and the way it grapples with what a supposedly glamorous city has to offer: "*Seene mein jalan aankhon mein toofaan sa kyun hai / Is sheher mein har ek shakhs pareshaan sa kyun hai*"¹⁹ (*Gaman* 1:16:16).

6. Conclusion

In the last sequence of *Gaman*, Ghulam waits for the train behind the grilled gates of the platform, confused as to whether he should board the train or not: "more than half of the money will go on the journey. What will I have left?" (1:50:51). In this way, much like Trinshanku's²⁰ fate, Ghulam is stuck in a state of limbo between his desire (to belong and earn) and his reality (which denies him both).

The diasporic narrative of Muzaffar Ali's *Gaman* therefore becomes the personal story of migrants. The director poignantly tells the story of those who survive in the fringes of a metropolis, are familiar with the ways of

15 Scopophilia is a term used to refer to the pleasure derived from the act of looking at a person (or an object). In cinema, scopophilia is used to define the explicit voyeurism harboured by the protagonist and the spectator. Laura Mulvey, a film theorist, uses this concept to explain voyeurism and male gaze in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

16 Realism was a literary and artistic movement that was conceived in the nineteenth century and was a reaction against Romanticism, which again had emerged as a fierce reaction and a critique to the Age of Enlightenment (1715-1789). If the Age of Enlightenment was that of reason and rationality, Romanticism came to be the age of *un-reason* and irrationality. Realism, on the contrary, focused on the precise imitation of reality without any fabrication or exaggeration. Paintings by Gustave Courbet, Honore Daumier, and Jean-Francois Millet are a testimony to this.

17 In her essay, Ranjini Mazumdar talks about the role of gangster films in portraying the underbelly of the cityscape. She discusses the idea of a residual city shown in gangster films which departs from the narrative of urban spaces as places for development shown in mainstream cinema.

18 The Realists believed that only that which could be sensed, i.e., seen, heard or touched, could be understood as subjects, thereby providing an enhanced understanding of the psyche of their characters.

a city and work in that city, and are ultimately disregarded by all. The spatial claustrophobia stands in opposition to the phantasmogoria of the aerial city of Bombay. This claustrophobic aspect of the city denies human emotions the ability to thrive and we see how violence becomes integral to define what a city means. Survival in the city therefore means constantly escaping death. The film ends with the same song it had begun with, bringing the directorial debut of Muzaffar Ali to a full circle and thereby hinting at the Sisyphean circularity of one's sufferings without any escape.

19 Trans. "Why the burning in the chest? The storm in the eyes? / Why is everyone in this city so troubled?"

20 Mentioned in the Valmiki Ramayana, Trishanku was a powerful king with a strong desire to go to Heaven with his physical body.

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The Symbolism of Cities: Navigating St. Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment*

Purbali Paul

Abstract

More than being the setting of *Crime and Punishment*, the city of St. Petersburg signifies a multi layered motif that heightens the urban realism of Dostoevsky as he explores ideas of morality, crime, religion, law, equality and so on. This paper explores the function and connotation of St. Petersburg, not only in terms of how the city in itself figures into the narrative action, but also as to what the topographical symbolism of the city represents. St. Petersburg is examined as a site of Western influence and a segregated space in which the lower strata of society, especially lower-class women, are negatively affected in an inordinate manner, as evinced through their cramped living structures and the rampant prostitution and drunkenness among them. The paper also explores how the city interweaves into the life of the characters of the novel and is reflected in their actions and identities.

Keywords: St. Petersburg, urban realism, duality, symbolism, nineteenth-century Russia.

1. Introduction

The city of St. Petersburg plays a more significant role in *Crime and Punishment* than merely that of setting. Through Raskolnikov's¹ interactions with the city and how intricately it is interwoven into the story, St. Petersburg plays the dual role of being an important motif as well as the backdrop of all events. The urban realism of Dostoevsky is significant with regard to the larger picture of how cities are constructed, built, lived in, and depicted in literature. Richard Gill observes that Dostoevsky was among "the first to recognise the symbolic possibilities of city life" and city imagery (146). The allusions to city life delineate the political and ideological symbolism of cities: as a space of opportunities, a space that upholds segregation in every way, as an ideologically and politically driven space, a space that proliferates isolation and embraces individualist endeavours, and so on. With industrialisation, the beginning of capitalism, and reforms during the nineteenth century to deal with demographic changes, cities became extremely socially and spatially divided. Divisions were created in terms of gender, financial condition, position in the social strata, etc. All cities are constructed, built, lived in, and depicted in literature. Richard Gill observes that Dostoevsky was among "the first to recognise the symbolic possibilities of city life" and city imagery (146). The allusions to city life delineate the political and ideological symbolism of cities: as a space of opportunities, a space that upholds segregation in every way, as an ideologically and politically driven space, a space that proliferates isolation and embraces individualist endeavours, and so on. With industrialisation, the beginning of capitalism, and reforms during the nineteenth century to deal with demographic changes, cities became extremely socially and spatially divided. Divisions were created in terms of gender, financial condition, position in the social strata, etc. All these factors and the visible Western influence in Russia make St. Petersburg an essential motif in the novel.

1 Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov is the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*. He is a dropped-out law student who avoids any company or conversation and lives in a cramped apartment. After committing two murders, he grapples with questions of ethics, transgression, religion, and so on. He considers himself an extraordinary man, beyond the rules of society. He finally turns himself in and serves eight years in Siberia.

Dostoevsky was highly influenced by Balzac's descriptions of Paris in *Old Man Goriot* and his technique of thick description.² Therefore, he also makes excruciating efforts in giving his readers details of the setting and reminding the readers that St. Petersburg is the backdrop of all events. When the author mentions Raskolnikov's apartment, it is not merely an apartment. The descriptions show the interiors of the cramped apartment and hence demonstrate how a university dropped out student lived in St. Petersburg in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that Dostoevsky, in most cases, just gives hints of the geographical locations in the novel, he maps out all the places for the readers. This makes him a realist author, who presents the grim reality of the social conditions of the places surrounding the Haymarket area of St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky himself lived in these areas and in similar conditions to Raskolnikov. Hence, his preoccupation with St. Petersburg as a setting and a motif manifests itself in the ways the characters behave in the novel. Dostoevsky creates a strong association between the characters and the city with the use of symbolism and contrast in the novel. Raskolnikov's ongoing battle with his own ambivalence of character is echoed in *Crime and Punishment's* portrayal of St. Petersburg as a city of dualities. This paper wishes to explore the link between characters and the city in *Crime and Punishment*.

2. Peter's Petersburg and Cultural Specificities

The city of St. Petersburg was founded by the Tsar, Peter the Great, in 1703 “against all architectural logic on a marshland” (Johae 260). The result of this mistake in town planning led to St. Petersburg being affected by recurrent floods. The Tsar, Peter I the Great, after years of international tours, had decided to introduce modernity and Western European culture to Russia—he changed his title to Emperor from Tsar, shifted his capital from Moscow to a city newly established by him, St. Petersburg, introduced modifications in the clothing, pedagogy, language, work culture, and so on. Indeed, the name of the city itself signifies a Western influence for St. Petersburg literally means St. Peter's Castle. Dostoevsky, as an Orthodox Christian, detested the reforms by the Tsar that were influenced by Western European concepts. The city of St. Petersburg was established by the Tsar with the aim of establishing his legacy through the creation of a new city from scratch, with Western ideals and city planning. But, the fact that the city was hit by floods repeatedly indicates the failure of an unquestioning admiration of the West.

This history of St. Petersburg finds its presence in Svidrigailov's³ dream in *Crime and Punishment*. He has many fragmented waking dreams in this sequence—one where he sees a young girl who had committed suicide lying in a coffin, followed by a dream of flood-warning by a cannon-shot, and then he dreams of a five year old girl gazing at him with lust in her eyes. The last is followed by Svidrigailov's suicide. Svidrigailov's suicide can be read in light of his desire of going to America, something which is as unrealistic as the desire to incorporate misfit Western values into Russian society. His suicide is hence symbolic of the failure of such an unrealistic enterprise. This failure of Western ideas has been illustrated in various other instances by Dostoevsky, which will be elucidated further into the paper. The inhumane conditions of the city, the constant reminder of the claustrophobia

² Martin Kanés calls the literary technique of Honore de Balzac in *Old Man Goriot*, of providing minute details about the setting, thick description. Balzac's narratives take up a lot of space while placing the characters in their settings. Similarly, Dostoevsky provides an analytical record of St. Petersburg like Balzac does of Paris. For more information, see *Balzac's Comedy of Words*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

³ Svidrigailov is a character who pursues Raskolnikov's sister, Dunya, despite being married to Marfa Petrovna, and later allegedly poisons his wife to get rid of her. He, like Raskolnikov, has very high views of himself and considers himself beyond the norms of morality, law and religion. He puts himself and his personal gains before anything else. He finally commits suicide after being rejected by Dunya and the dreams that follow.

it induces, and its highly segregated society are some of the instances of the failure of a city modelled on Western ideas.

Raskolnikov, with his Napoleonic aspirations⁴ for power, is blinded by the rational model of the West⁵. Inspired by monism⁶ and Napoleon, he believes that he can commit, justify, and execute a crime rationally. Through Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky provides a critique of the nineteenth century's emphasis on pure rationality. As Raskolnikov takes a detour to Alyona Ivanovna's⁷ house, his mind is preoccupied "by various irrelevant thoughts" (Dostoevsky 112). The detour is completely unintentional, but it signifies the ideological meaning of topography for Dostoevsky. The unconscious detour presents Raskolnikov with an advantageous opportunity to kill the pawnbroker and rob her of her wealth after he overhears a conversation with Lizaveta⁸ in a tavern. He imagines a reconstruction of St. Petersburg for the benefit of the city and its people:

Walking past the Yusupov Gardens, he was even getting carried away by the notion of introducing tall fountains there ... would be a wonderful and most beneficial thing for the city. He suddenly wondered why it is that in every large city, man—out of some particular inclination as much as actual need—lives and makes his home in precisely those parts of town where there are neither gardens nor fountains, where there is filth and stench and every He suddenly wondered why it is that in every large city, man—out of some particular inclination as much as actual need—lives and makes his home in precisely those parts of town where there are neither gardens nor fountains, where there is filth and stench and every unpleasantness. Then he remembered his wanders around Haymarket and briefly came to his senses. (Dostoevsky 112-113)

Adele Lindenmeur claims that Raskolnikov's speculative plans for reconstructing St. Petersburg reflect Dostoevsky's own background as a draughtsman and his study of architectural history on the pages of *Crime and Punishment* (qtd. in Peace 3). This imaginative reconstruction for the city's benefit is an example that shows Dostoevsky was unhappy with the Western influence in Russian architecture.

As pointed out by Ulrich Schmid, Dostoevsky bestows places and directions with ideological meanings.

4 Raskolnikov, in many senses, has similar aspirations to Napoleon. Just like Napoleon desired to reconstruct Paris, Raskolnikov wants to reconstruct St. Petersburg and the society. Raskolnikov also considered himself a superhuman figure like Napoleon. For more information, see Peace, Richard. *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: A Casebook*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

5 The rational model of the West is a reference to the increasing emphasis posited by the West on rationality and reason. This developed during the eighteenth century and one of the main proponents of rationality was René Descartes whose famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am", is the crux of this thought.

6 Monism is a doctrine used to refer to the idea that only one set of beliefs exists.

7 Alyona Ivanovna is an old pawnbroker who is murdered by Raskolnikov. He had also pawned multiple items to her for money. Many people, including Raskolnikov, considered her a louse who deserves to die.

8 Lizaveta is Alyona's meek sister who is said to be often beaten by Alyona. She accidentally becomes a victim of Raskolnikov's plan and is murdered by him.

9 Sonya is Marmaledev's daughter. After her step-mother, Katerina, remarks that she is doing nothing to help the family financially, she sacrifices herself and takes up prostitution as the last resort to feed her family. She reads the story of Lazarus to Raskolnikov and later becomes the first person to whom Raskolnikov confesses his crime. She encourages Raskolnikov to confess his crime and accept the punishment. She even follows him to Siberia, where Raskolnikov spends his term for the murders.

Schmid shows how Raskolnikov, on his way (detour) to the pawnbroker's house, encounters the Nikolskii Cathedral, a Russian orthodox church, which has a very important position in Dostoevsky's ideologica space. Many buildings in St. Petersburg were designed in the Western style of architecture. Another example is the Marinskii theatre that also falls on Raskolnikov's path to the pawnbroker's house. Schmid states that the theatre was renovated after it got engulfed by fire in 1859. A new building was built in the place of the theatre that gave way to the western genre of opera. Thus, Schmid notes that the direction Raskolnikov takes to commit the sin is westward, and as he thinks about how he can execute his plan rationally, "he enters the false world of western theatrical culture"(56). Just as the ideal for St. Petersburg is foreign ideas, Raskolnikov's ideal figures are not native Russians; he idealises leaders like Napoleon and Lycurgus, and innovators like Newton and Kepler. For the author, anything associated with the West is a symbol of degeneracy and should be considered unacceptable in Russian culture. Later in the plot, Raskolnikov, after Sonya's⁹ request, confesses his crime, kisses the Russian soil, and goes to Siberia as punishment. This signifies Raskolnikov's return to the Russian ideal and his movement eastward for metaphorical salvation.

2.1 Bridges: Decision and Indecision

The bridges in *Crime and Punishment* have also been recognised as symbolic spaces. Even though Raskolnikov is successful in executing the murder and evading punishment for a long time, a lot of the action which forms the narrative consists of mere chances and coincidences. However, a close reading of *Crime and Punishment* would show that the descriptions of bridges in the narrative are not merely coincidental or unintentional. Gill asserts that "allusions to bridges recur throughout the novel, not incidentally but in connection with nodal points of the action and motivation" (156). A bridge is mentioned right in the opening lines of the novel: "In early July, in exceptional heat, towards evening, a young man left the garret he was renting in S——y Lane, stepped outside, and slowly, as if in two minds, set off towards K——n Bridge." (Dostoevsky 44)

Vadim K. Koszhinov remarks that the opening line of the novel "has a symbolic function" and calls it the "embryo of the whole huge novel" (qtd. in Gill 146). The phrase, "as if in two minds", resembles Raskolnikov's dilemma about committing the crime. Raskolnikov's name implies a schism, and the bridge is also a symbol of duality. It signifies both contact and distance and allows a person to oscillate between two choices. The metaphor of the bridge indicates a period of transition and a state of being in between. The metaphor can be understood in terms of Raskolnikov's swaying between the choice of taking "a new step" (Dostoevsky 44) and analysing its ramifications. The bridge is also one of the locations where spectacular turns occur, changing the course of action. The views from the bridge are the choices Raskolnikov has after the crime. The structure visible from the bridge after the crime is a cathedral representing the Orthodox Christian religion.. The cathedral signifies attainment of salvation by suffering for the crime committed. The cathedral is posed in juxtaposition with Western degeneracy, represented by the taverns and Raskolnikov's western ideals.

Gill maps out the geographical details laid down by Dostoevsky in the novel and locates the place where Raskolnikov dreams of the mare being killed by Mikolka¹⁰ as Peterbugskij Island (151). Furthermore, he adds that, according to a map of St. Petersburg, going along the canal away from Sonya's room would lead Raskolnikov

10 Mikolka is the owner of a mare who is flogged to death by him. A frenzied crowd under the influence of alcohol further instigates him to beat the mare more violently. This incident that took place during Raskolnikov's childhood haunts him in the form of recurrent nightmares.

to none other than Kokushkin Bridge, which he crossed on his route to the pawnbroker's. As Gill notes, Raskolnikov shifts from his crime to his punishment by crossing this same bridge twice (152). This is evident when Raskolnikov says "A week from now, a month from now, when I'm being taken God knows where in one of those convict wagons over this very bridge..." (Dostoevsky 550). Soon after this, he goes to the police station and confesses his crime. Hence, the bridge marks Raskolnikov's movement from sin to redemption.

3. The Segregated Landscape of St. Petersburg

With the onset of urbanisation in the nineteenth century, major cities like London, Paris, and St. Petersburg witnessed a huge influx of people from the provinces for educational and job opportunities, like Raskolnikov and Razumikhin¹¹ in the novel. The reflexive quality of a city, as shown in St. Petersburg's multifaceted reflection of Raskolnikov, shows how St. Petersburg has a lot to do with the identity-making of all the characters, especially Raskolnikov. Dostoevsky's choice of Raskolnikov as the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, who belongs to a lower social class and yet aspires to be a part of the revered intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Russia, has certain implications for his examination of the social inequalities prevalent

Dostoevsky deliberately refrains from any descriptions of the well-to-do corners of St. Petersburg. A. D. Nuttall is right in saying that the claustrophobic description of St. Petersburg is so intense that it becomes "difficult to remember St. Petersburg... [as] also a city of immense squares and noble boulevards" (11). The stifling nature of the spaces becomes evident right in the opening line of the novel. The day is exceptionally hot; the heat conveys infernal connotations and the stifling environment of the city. The room where Raskolnikov resides is called a garret by the author. Later, it is compared to a cupboard and a coffin. Oliver Ready¹² indicates that the living conditions of Dostoevsky are mirrored in Raskolnikov's life: cramped quarters, abject poverty, isolation from the rest of the world, living on limited food and means, and being exiled to Siberia. The area that surrounds Haymarket is inhabited by people of similar socio-economic context. Raskolnikov is always found to be travelling on foot, to the extent that he knows that it is seven hundred and thirty paces from his apartment's gate to the pawnbroker's house. When Razumikhin accompanies Pulcheria¹³ and Dunya¹⁴ to their lodging, they walk. Svidrigailov pursues Sonya on foot. However, the few characters living in the areas surrounding Haymarket use carriages to navigate the city.

Interestingly, throughout the novel, one cannot find any reference to carriages without associating them with violence. The only mention of a carriage without any violent consequences is when Raskolnikov takes a detour to the pawnbroker's house, which is far from Haymarket. After this, Dostoevsky refers to the carriage when

11 Razumikhin is Raskolnikov's only friend and is his foil. As Raskolnikov moves away from his mother and sister, Razumikhin replaces him and takes care of them. He goes on to help Raskolnikov at every stage of the novel.

12 See Ready, Oliver. "Introduction." *Crime and Punishment: (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition)*, Penguin Publishing Group, 2015.

13 Pulcheria is Raskolnikov's mother. Until the novel ends, she never knows what exactly has happened to Raskolnikov and what he has done.

14 Dunya is Raskolnikov's sister who considers sacrificing herself for her family by marrying a self-obsessive man, Luzhin. She is pursued by Svidrigailov, despite her rejecting him multiple times.

15 Marmeladov is a former government official and a drunkard. He marries the widow, Katerina Ivanovna, to support her and her children from a previous marriage, but he makes her life no better. He is an absent husband and father figure. His daughter has to resort to prostitution to fend for her family. He dies after a carriage runs over him. He represents the decay of Russian society due to alcoholism.

a carriage driver whips Raskolnikov to shove him off his path. Marmeladov¹⁵ gets run down by the carriage of a “wealthy and important owner” and dies after a few scenes (Dostoevsky 213). The next reference to a carriage is by Svidrigailov and is done in conjunction with thrashing. Owning or travelling in a carriage is a marker of high social status and economic prosperity, which most of the characters of *Crime and Punishment* enjoy. It is as if the carriages, symbolic of wealth and power, do nothing except inflict violence on the people belonging to the lower strata of society. Balzac in *Le Père Goriot* uses the imagery of the people belonging to the lower strata of society. Balzac in *Le Père Goriot* uses the imagery of the people being crushed under the wheel of the chariot of the Hindu god *Jagannath* during the procession called *Ratha Yatra*. There are parallels in both the texts in how carriages and what they are emblematic of crush the common people. Taking into account the tremendous influence of Balzac on Dostoevsky— Julia Titus argues that Dostoevsky had read *Le Père Goriot*, translated some of Balzac’s works into Russian, and admired Balzac’s writing prowess— one can consider that he borrowed this imagery from Balzac to exemplify the grim reality of nineteenth-century cities.¹⁶ Dostoevsky, like Balzac, exhibits the rising significance of the city as a place of opportunities, and how wretched its conditions were for the common man.

Another privilege that no one living near Haymarket enjoys is being close to nature. Industrialisation and urbanisation had already distanced people from their natural living conditions. The effect of industrialisation can be seen in the repeated description of St. Petersburg with its dust-filled air, dilapidated buildings, and stench. Raskolnikov establishes a link between a person’s living environment and his inner and mental state in the following passage:

It was dreadfully hot, not to mention the closeness of the air, the crush of people, the mortar, scaffolding, bricks, dust, and that specific summer stench so familiar to any Petersburgers too poor to rent a dacha—all this gave a nasty jolt to the young man’s already rattled nerves. The unbearable stink from the drinking dens, of which there are so many in this part of town, and the drunks who kept crossing his path even though it was only a weekday, added the final touches to this sad and revolting scene. (Dostoevsky 45)

A similar attempt is seen in a conversation between Raskolnikov and Sonya, where he asserts that “low ceilings and tiny rooms cramp the soul and the mind” (Dostoevsky 445). Donald Fanger¹⁷ notes that the novel shows Raskolnikov’s movement from stifling rooms to stifling streets. Raskolnikov encounters “greenery and the freshness” only around Yusupov Gardens, when he leaves behind “the closeness, the stench, the drinking dens”, thus making a clear distinction between the Haymarket and these squares and gardens (Dostoevsky 94).

The segregation of St. Petersburg is exemplified further by Dostoevsky’s hint that Raskolnikov’s ragged clothes do not surprise anyone in the neighbourhood because everything in this locality is dilapidated:

[T]his wasn’t the sort of district where people were easily shocked. The proximity of the Haymarket, the profusion of notorious establishments, and the local residents, mainly craftsmen and workers, all crammed into these streets and lanes in the middle of town, often furnished the scene with such colourful characters that it would have been strange to be shocked, whoever you met. (Dostoevsky 45)

¹⁶ For more information on the influence of Balzac on Dostoevsky, see Titus, Julia. *Dostoevsky as a Translator of Balzac*. Academic Studies Press, 2022.

¹⁷ See Fanger, Donald. “Apogee: Crime and Punishment.” *Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment: A Casebook*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

Haymarket has been often seen as the microcosm of St. Petersburg, and the way Dostoevsky equates the broken and decayed ideals of Russia with the crumbling affairs of Haymarket proves the point further.

3.1. Dostoevsky's Preoccupation with Raskolnikov's Garrett

The cramped Haymarket of St. Petersburg seems to affect Raskolnikov more than anyone else. Dostoevsky's claustrophobia is reserved for Raskolnikov because, even though most of the characters in the novel are in similar economic conditions, only his room is called "garrett" (Dostoevsky 68), "coffin"(265), "ship's cabin"(157), and "cupboard"(45) in different instances. Sonia, being a prostitute, has to take a yellow ticket, and hence her landlady does not allow her to stay in the boarding house anymore, where her family resides. She goes to live at *Kapernaumov's*, where the cleft-lipped family of a tailor also resides. However, Marmeladov's description of Sonya's room does not evoke a sense of suffocation. Luzhin¹⁸ puts Pulcheria and Dunya up in an apartment, which is apparently a place where fallen women live. The service at that lodging was not what they had expected, but even their room did not give the idea of claustrophobia. It is as if Dostoevsky deliberately wants to distinguish Raskolnikov's room from any other room vis-a-vis its oppressive connotations. His room is bereft of any fresh air or sunlight, but on a trial visit to the pawnbroker's house, Raskolnikov finds her room shining brightly with sunlight. He is "repeatedly associated with suffocating, tiny spaces, with cramped living quarters and narrow streets" (Nuttall 20). In a conversation with Dunya after they meet Raskolnikov, she says that Raskolnikov needs more sun and air in his room for better health. There is a hint that his illness can be cured by letting air and sunlight into his closet-like room. It is interesting to note that Raskolnikov is aware that his cupboard-like room is not doing him any good, yet he does not leave his room owing to his reclusive nature. In the initial pages of *Crime and Punishment*, he avoids going out, because he fears he might encounter his landlady and would have to listen to her daily tales that are of little importance to him.

4. The City's Treatment of Women

The illness of Raskolnikov after the crime gives noteworthy insights into how the city as a political space is generated. Raskolnikov wanders the city with intentions similar to those of a *flaneur*¹⁹. Raskolnikov does not think twice before choosing a path or taking a detour. He is on the streets even when he is delirious after he has murdered Alyona and Lizaveta. Yet he faces no threat while he walks mindlessly on the streets, except when he was whipped by a carriage driver once. On the other hand, most of the women characters the readers encounter on the streets of Petersburg are pursued by men, harassed, or raped. Dunya and Sonya are stalked by Svidrigailov. A young girl is pursued by a debaucher when she is intoxicated. Bare-headed women working as prostitutes are present all around the taverns in Haymarket with all sorts of marks on themselves. Raskolnikov meets Duklida, a girl of thirty with bruises on her face. Poverty and sustenance of life become the prime reasons why women in St. Petersburg resort to prostitution in the novel. Marmeladov narrates his daughter's sacrifice for the family publicly in a tavern. Much later in the novel, Raskolnikov questions the validity of Sonya's sacrifice and disrupts the illusions of the betterment of her life in the city shared by the likes of Katerina Ivanova, by making her aware of Po-

18 Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin is engaged to Dunya. He is a pretentious government official who attempts to show himself off as someone with grand ideas. He believes that women who feel indebted to their husbands make good wives. He is preoccupied with the desire for power and public good opinion of himself.

19 The *flaneur* began as a French concept, first found in the works of Charles Baudelaire. A *flaneur* is usually defined as a person who wanders in the streets of cities aimlessly and observes the ways of a modern city. The idea has later been taken up to study the politics of urban spaces.

lenka's²⁰ reality. Raskolnikov tries to put this unpleasant situation in terms of pure arithmetic; after seeing a young girl being pursued by a man, he says that every year, a "certain percentage... must go that way" (Dostoevsky 91).

Another significant point of consideration is how women suffer due to the actions of men. Raskolnikov categorises people as heroes and louse. Inspired by this categorisation, he moves on to murder Alyona. As opposed to his own belief that he is an *Übermensch*²¹, he is living off the hard-earned money of his family. In Marfa Petrovna's²² case, even after she got her husband off the hook, he thrashes her, causing her death. Her husband, Svidrigailov, misbehaved with Dunya, and due to a misunderstanding, Dunya was defamed in the country. Katerina Ivanovna²³ and her children live in deplorable conditions because Marmeladov wastes money on his incessant drinking habit. Even after he regains his position as an official, he steals and spends the entire money on himself. Recent studies have shown how one of the factors behind the violence against women is that most cities have been planned and designed as well as their laws administered by men. The society and city does not punish men for their actions as it punishes women for not only their actions, but also the actions of men they are associated with. In all the abovementioned instances, women bear the brunt of the actions of the men associated with them and run the risk of gendered violence more than men.

5. Drunkenness and the Motif of Taverns

Drunkenness was a prevalent social problem in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Russia, and to counter it, reforms were introduced, but they were of no help. G.G. Zaigraev, Head Science Associate of the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, reports that to counter alcoholism, there were around four reforms prior to 1917. "After each drastically stepped-up anti-alcohol campaign, [Russian] society found itself faced with an even greater spread of drunkenness and alcoholism" (qtd. in Fedun). The drunkenness was a result of the rapid spread of taverns, which is clear from the number of taverns one can find in *Crime and Punishment*. The problem of drunkenness has been presented by Marmeladov, and the ramifications are shown through the difficulties faced by Katerina Ivanovna in bringing up her children, and Sonya's necessity to become a prostitute to sustain her family. Even after Marmeladov gets his job back, he wastes all his money on drinking and ultimately dies because of it. His death leaves his family vulnerable and without any financial or social security. The problem of increased public drinking is also manifested in Raskolnikov's recurrent dream of an incident that happened during his childhood, where a frenzied group of drunkards inflict violence on a helpless mare.

20 Polenka is one of Katerina's daughters and Sonya's step-sister. Raskolnikov makes Sonya realise that her sacrifice to protect her step-siblings might be completely futile and after a few years. Even Polenka might be forced into prostitution if the children are not taken care of properly now.

21 The concept of the *Übermensch* was created and defined by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he uses it to contrast the other-worldliness morality of Christianity and instead posits these superhuman men as able to do anything they wish within the moral vacuum of nihilism. Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov is a precursor to the figure of the *Übermensch*, who is distanced from the church. However, only through suffering and rebirth with the help of the church does Dostoevsky allow Raskolnikov to end the raving and illness that plagued him.

22 Marfa is Svidrigailov's wife. She accuses Dunya of initiating an affair with her husband. After realisation dawns upon her, she goes from village to village to clear the name of Dunya. She also sweeps the sexual abuse of a girl by her husband under the carpet.

23 Katerina Ivanovna is a woman who had lived better days before she became a widow. She then gets married to a government official, Marmeladov, but this does not improve her life. She inflicts violence on her children, even though she wants to keep them alive. She also suffers from tuberculosis.

At the same time, the taverns become the centre of action in the novel. The highly symbolic dream Raskolnikov has about the mare being killed is located near a tavern.. It is in a tavern that Raskolnikov gets to know about Sonya's plight from Marmeladov. Additionally, the taverns are the focal point of intellectual discussions that give the readers insight into the contemporary, prevalent ideology of Russia. A student at a tavern where Raskolnikov is also present coincidentally engages in a conversation that shows that he is influenced by Jeremy Bentham's idea of utilitarianism²⁴. He echoes what Raskolnikov believed: the division of society into louse and heroic individuals. The student proposes that the old pawnbroker should be murdered and her money can be used to bring families out of poverty. One of the reasons for the enormous popularity of utilitarian concepts among university-going students like Raskolnikov is the socio-economic ramifications of the extreme segregation in St. Petersburg.

There are multiple drinking dens in Haymarket, but Dostoevsky intentionally names one of them. After Raskolnikov has committed the murder, he goes to a tavern called Crystal Palace to read the news about his own crime. It is here that Raskolnikov, due to his arrogance, almost gives himself away to Zametov²⁵ as the murderer of the pawnbroker. The tavern's name is derived from a display by the British government.²⁶ The Crystal Palace and the Russian Orthodox Cathedral are placed in opposition to each other, signifying the dichotomy of damnation versus salvation. Thus, Raskolnikov's arrogant attempt to reveal himself as the murderer happens in this tavern that resembles western influence.

6. Conclusion

St. Petersburg is, in many ways, reflective of the characters in the novel, serving the dual purpose of a motif and the setting. The hidden symbolism of St. Petersburg can be found in the links between physical structures, buildings and events and Dostoevsky's political and philosophical thoughts. Through the motif of St Petersburg, Dostoevsky shows how public places are inaccessible for certain identities and examines the connotations of segregation. This is especially relevant because years after globalisation, urbanisation and industrialisation, cities around the world remain segregated on the basis of monetary status, social position, gender, religion, and other forms of identity. The city witnesses ubiquitous gendered violence and the ill effects of alcoholism. The structures in a city are always shaped by a particular ideology. Dostoevsky and, through him, Raskolnikov have this awareness. Dostoevsky employs the symbolism of the topography of St. Petersburg to present the greater realities of his time.

24 Utilitarianism is a theory that measures the validity of an action based on its utility and the extent of benefit caused to humans. The consequences of an action decide whether an action is moral or immoral.

25 Zametov is a police officer. Raskolnikov encounters him at Crystal Palace where he frightens Zametov by explaining how he would have carried out the murders. This causes suspicion and hence, Zametov informs Porfiry about this incident.

26 Antony Johae argues that Dostoevsky, in naming the tavern, was inspired by the Crystal Palace, a structure built in London in 1851 for the exhibition of the Industry of All Nations that served as a sort of memorial to industrialism and the utilitarian philosophy that underpinned it. For more information, see "Towards an Iconography of 'Crime and Punishment'." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.

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Sleep, Subsistence, and Morality Frameworks in *Crime and Punishment*³⁶

Tara Kalra

Abstract

This paper analyses the notion of sleep, as not just a physical but also a psychological phenomenon which has certain connotations attached to it in a society influenced by a capitalistic ethos, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The collective belief of viewing sleep as restorative and restricting it to a realm of leisure which must be earned and worked for is challenged by Dostoyevsky as to Raskolnikov, the protagonist, sleep comes involuntarily and uncontrollably, turning the idea of lethargy and non-work on its axis. This paper also uses its study of sleep to analyse the aetiology of Raskolnikov's crime, underlining material considerations and motives behind it. By exploring specific moments that follow and precede the act of sleeping, a psychological measurement of Raskolnikov's consciousness will be attempted.

Keywords: Sleep, subsistence, capitalism, isolation, Marxism.

All good things used to be bad things at one time; every original sin has turned into an original virtue—Friedrich Nietzsche.¹

1. Introduction

The plot of *Crime and Punishment* revolves around a singular act of crime, the murder of Alyona Ivanova,² which acts as the thrust behind the novel's narrative action and an important point of critical examination. within a singular framework. It is important to see the justification of the crime in close proximity to Raskolnikov's mental conditions post the act. The crime was committed in line with a principle of claiming an abstract extraordinariness, and the pressure to think outside frameworks while fighting a lack of subsistence. It is not, in any capacity, a psychopathy or an antisocial personality disorder but a deprived outlook combined with a saviour complex which allows Raskolnikov to think that he is eliminating a supposed evil amidst absence of financial and material backing. It is a quintessential case of Relative Deprivation Theory,³ which is realised and attempted to be resolved by a person who views his deprivation in individualistic terms. This reading of the text will be in tandem with its representation of individuality, analysing the slow progress of Raskolnikov⁴ through the isolated act of sleep and its relation with necessary means of subsistence. Keeping this understanding as the base, Raskolnikov's individuality and a subjective unravelling of post-crime consequences will be explored, employing sleep-induced isolation as a method to understand the aetiology⁵ of the crime's principle itself. With sleep and subsistence as the two cornerstones of the study, a larger critique of society will be attempted. The methodology implied will juxtapose a positivist paradigm generating explanatory associations which focus on Raskolnikov's tangible reality as something that can be described, understood, and analysed. It will also put forth a critical approach, so as to propose an alternative paradigm to view the novel and through it, the larger societal framework as well. The paper will attempt to underline the revolutionary attempts behind Raskolnikov's criminal principles arising out of a flawed system. This system is composed of not only capitalistic structures, but also corresponding schools

1 From On the *Genealogy of Morality*.

2 A pawnbroker; alternatively called "the old hag" or "the louse" (Dostoyevsky 161) is murdered by the protagonist, Raskolnikov, on the pretext of her being shrewd and taking undue advantage of the vulnerable poor.

of thought which allow questions to be raised and discussed without any articulation of their resolution.

2. Sleep and its Relation to Means of Subsistence:

Raskolnikov is a planner, not a doer; thinking and idealising in strong adherence to his intellectual principles. Dostoevsky allows Raskolnikov to see through the estranged barriers of human existence, lending to him the imaginative ability to perceive himself as extraordinary, capable of extracting evil. These principles of the extraordinary man and the conceived *ubermensch*⁶ however, are a fundamental mould for the individualistic man who reeks of a level of intellectual and emotional detachment which brings with it a constant and unconscious gravitation towards isolation. Raskolnikov does not seek structure through stable and suppressive employment. His self-inflicted isolation becomes a way of making meaning out of his surroundings, where everyone seems to be mindlessly moving towards unattainable goals. In a way, isolation and sleep allow him to eventually attain his goal. While isolation allows contemplation, the self-occupied space steadily becomes an echo chamber:

If man isn't actually a scoundrel, isn't actually scum, the whole human race, I mean, then all else is mere preconception, just fears that have been foisted upon us, and there are no barriers, and that's exactly how it should be! (Dostoyevsky 102)

Right at the initial stages, Raskolnikov establishes the foundation of his principles— an unquestioned belief in the inherent superiority of the individual who, in lieu of his intellectual supremacy, is able and ready to see through all preconception that has been foisted upon him. Raskolnikov is aware of the limited nature of his existential framework. One of the main reasons behind his vivid dreams, however, lies in his inability to think of an alternative paradigm which would allow him to move beyond means of subsistence and actualise his intellectual aspirations. Through his article in a journal, Raskolnikov makes a distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary with the latter being able to afford some form of independence. Crime and overstepping the law is not merely a sign of defiance but turning the course of history, piquing it to move forward:

The first category is always master of the present, the second – master of the future. The first preserves the world and multiplies; the second moves the world and leads it towards a goal. The first and the second have exactly the same right to exist. (Dostoyevsky 462)

The garret, with its constricted interior, withered walls, and debilitated atmosphere becomes a metaphor for frameworks and striving for subsistence. The etymology of Raskolnikov's name— a schism— represents a

3 Relative Deprivation Theory (RD) works according to an upward comparison that indicates how one's disadvantaged position is undeserved. It is often coupled with anger and resentment, resulting in reduced psychological health, individual deviance, and collective action. See Smith, J. Heather and Thomas Fraser Pettigrew. "Relative Deprivation Theory: Advances and Applications." *Social Comparison, Judgment, and Behavior*, 2020, pp.495-526. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190629113.003.0018.

4 The protagonist of the novel who murders the pawnbroker to justify his intellectual endeavour to restore material balance. He also robs Alyona Ivanovna as a means to gain money, fund his education, and headstart his career. The name Raskolnikov roughly translates to schism, representing a dichotomous question around the worth of existence, its material repercussions, and the dilemma between societal guilt and personal perspectives.

5 Determinants involved in the cause, risk, or developments of a disease or conditions, coupled with studies aimed at understanding behaviours. See "Aetiology." *HRC Online*, <https://hrcsonline.net/research-activities/2-aetiology/>.

6 Often translated to overman or superman, the term might be seen as a metaphor for someone who transcends doctrines of morality, placed at the centre of Friedrich Nietzsche's Theory of Greatness.

significant divide in belief, a divide that separates the isolated self capable of cold-blooded murder from the ³⁸socialised self. In sleep, the person is their unified self, with the divide between the unconscious (Raskolnikov's isolated self) and conscious (Raskolnikov's socialised self) invisibilized. Raskolnikov's inability to sleep is the sentence served by a man whose principles remain intact despite the erosion of this divide. As he acts in accordance with his intellectual aspirations, the isolated self takes charge of the socialised self, making Raskolnikov's reality a living hell— "He woke up late the next day, unrefreshed, after a troubled night's sleep. He woke up sour, irritable and angry, and looked with loathing at his garret" (Dostoyevsky 103).

3.1 Conceptions of Rest and Sleep within a Capitalistic Framework

The conception of sleep in the novel is revolutionary not only because of the way it occurs in an interspersed and almost inevitable and uncontrollable manner, but also because it stands in direct opposition to a society which reveres constant action and will. An instance of such action and will from the novel is the initial description of Razumikhin⁷. It raises the question of material insecurity and the religious nature of work which makes hardship a prerequisite to obtaining relatively better sleep; in other words, a poor person must always earn their rest:

He was dirt poor yet persisted in supporting himself all on his own, taking odd jobs to get by. He knew any number of sources from which he could draw (by working, of course). Once, he survived a whole winter without heating his room and claimed that he even preferred it that way, because you sleep better in the cold. (Dostoyevsky 141)

One is reminded of Karl Marx's vision of political economy and surplus value from the perspective of the labour class as propounded in *Das Kapital*. Marx mentions that in order to generate profit in the exchange of commodities, surplus value is generated through the addition of human labour in the production process. This addition goes beyond the necessary labour-time given by a worker. The work day is obscure and never fixed, revealing that the capitalistic system is entirely dependent on this constant motion, leaving the worker no time or mental scope to think beyond their basic subsistence. The moment the worker questions the nature of their work is seen by the capitalistic endeavour not only as a hindrance, but categorised as a violent form of crime.

To further substantiate, Marx's system of analytical thought with the theoretical aid provided by Emile Durkheim's sociological theories of crime is contextualised:

Capitalism was thought to impose a 'forced division of labour'. People acquiesced neither in the apportionment of rewards nor in the moral authority of the economy or state. They were obliged to work and act in a society that not only enjoyed little legitimacy but also exercised an incomplete control over their desires. In such a setting, it was held, 'man's nature [was to be] eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance without relief or rest, towards an indefinite goal'. (Rock 53)

The keyword here is indefinite goal. Opposingly, Raskolnikov has a definitive goal in accordance with a planned reason, that of murdering the pawnbroker so as to make his life substantially better in economic and class terms and result in the culmination of his theory of the *ubermensch*. Capitalism, however, disallows that by underlining the fundamental inertia of Raskolnikov's existence and using it as a basis to determine his conditions. Capitalism,

⁷ The foil to Raskolnikov's character, Razumikhin is the protagonist's friend. He is generous, optimistic, hard working and displays all the qualities absent in Raskolnikov. In the absence of Raskolnikov's sound presence, Razumikhin takes responsibility for Raskolnikov's family.

as a system, does not inquire into the causes or circumstances that led to this life. On one hand, the idea of an ³⁹indefinite goal demonises and vilifies rest, forced or voluntary. Marx, on the other hand, finds that leisure and work are interdependent, historically created forms⁸. Raskolnikov is not a part of the working class but he is the object of a larger mindset which differentiates between work and non-work, rest and productivity.

Furthermore, Marx writes about how workers are turned into “spiritually and physically dehumanised beings”, reduced to “an abstract activity and stomach” where “each worker is estranged from the other, as each of them is from ‘man’s essential nature” (Marx 4). Marx is clearly concerned with the alienation implicit in human relations under capitalistic systems. Raskolnikov— by overhearing the frustrations of young students, attempting to help a drunk girl on the street, and even giving the last of his wealth to Katerina Ivanovna’s family— reflects his perceptivity to the estrangement around him and his desire to try and overcome the same. Everytime Raskolnikov falls asleep, he rejects work and the responsibilities endowed to him as the patriarch who is at the helm of family affairs. He sleeps, not to restore or replenish but to make meaning out of this disengagement and alienation which views humans in objectified capacities and repositories of value and exchange.

One can imagine the socio-economic system governing the world of *Crime and Punishment* as one where the mass of society has been fit into a claustrophobic box. Those around the boundaries of the box are well-equipped to put pressure on those at the centre, extracting surplus work and denying them human essence. Since they are at the boundaries, rest is accessible. For those situated in the pressured centre, rest is denied unless they choose to rebel, express awareness, or simply succumb to the pressures. Otherwise, they are thrown out, finding themselves outcast with no means of survival and a form of rest which is far from restorative.

The physical mapping of Saint Petersburg with its clustered planning, taverns, and the disbalanced authority of landlords to tenants, gives a glimpse of such people situated in the centre as a rising invisible majority.⁹ This system also upholds a psychological worldview which not only looks down upon various articulations of rest, but also upholds the most salient feature of capitalist psychology— self-interest. Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin’s¹⁰ first meeting with Raskolnikov emphasises the importance of keeping one’s private affairs arranged, culminating in firmer societal grounds and maintenance of norms. In the same meeting, Razumikhin emphasises the need for an action-oriented existence among “an inveterate shortage of doers” (Dostoyevsky 294) as Raskolnikov sits in a half-conscious state overhearing the conversation.

In his lecture on Gandhi and Marx, Akeel Bilgrami, with his focus on Marx, delineates how lack of equality persists because of the alienation in human relations. Humans live devoid of any subjective engagement with their surroundings, viewing relationships as sources of production of value which is at once abstract and material. any subjective engagement with their surroundings, viewing relationships as sources of production of value which is

8 See Rojek, Chris. “Did Marx Have a Theory of Leisure?” *Leisure Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Jan. 1984, pp. 163–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614368400390141>.

9 The material basis of the invisibility of the majority manifests itself in a structural increase of unemployment, labour market precarization, and poverty. Invisibility makes growing segments of the population less likely to participate in the institutions which regulate social life. For more information, see Ferragina, Emanuele, et al. “The Rising Invisible Majority.” *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2022, pp. 114–151. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09692290.2020.1797853?journalCode=rrip20>

10 Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin is a distant relative of Marfa Petrovna (Svidrigailov’s wife and Dunya’s employer). He becomes Dunya’s fiance on the pretext of marrying a poor and submissive girl. Luzhin also tries to frame Sonya for a potential robbery, revealing the shrewd and purely immoral nature of his character.

at once abstract and material.¹¹ Raskolnikov attempts to see through this and distance himself from it. As a way⁴⁰ to resolve the atomised anonymity of the framework he finds himself in, he resorts to isolating himself. This narrative is further reified if one sees it in the context of Raskolnikov's fondness of Sonya, a person who cannot possibly give anything valuable but merely partakes in unalienated suffering and companionship. Sonya holds no material standing, living on the margins of mainstream social life. Yet she represents a subjective agency, devoting herself to faith and expressing her individuality according to her human essence. Her work rose out of compulsion and necessity. It continues, however, according to her terms and unalienated subjectivity. It is Sonya's ability to be a part of societal frameworks and yet, consciously distant, as well as protecting her ability to believe in the absurdity of existence while also finding faith within it that ignites Raskolnikov's fondness for her.

3.2. Analysing Raskolnikov's Dreams

Raskolnikov's dream of Mikolka and the mare and the one culminating with meeting Svidirgailov are pivotal in an understanding of sleep as a manifestation of fallen aspirations and a suppressed living. The first dream immediately follows Raskolnikov's reading of his mother's letter, his denotative understanding of Dunya's¹² voluntary prostitution, a subsequent attempt to save a drunk girl from sexual abuse, and an unsuccessful expression of help in front of Razumukhin. The dream of the beaten mare and Mikolka comes to Raskolnikov post these attempts, induced by heavy exhaustion:

His legs suddenly grew heavy and he began to feel extremely sleepy. He headed home; but just as he was reaching Petrovsky Island he stopped in utter exhaustion, turned off the road into the bushes, collapsed on the grass and fell asleep there and then. In morbid states dreams are often unusually palpable and vivid, bearing an exceptional resemblance to reality. (Dostoyevsky 144)

Mikolka and the cart laden with drunk townsmen becomes the newly-emerging modern, capitalist framework with its emphasis on state authority. The cart is saturated, being forced to move and is driven by an unchecked-pursuit where everyone on the cart is only a means to an end. The drunk townsmen are members of this societal framework, equally alienated from the plight of the mare and deriving a polarised¹³ pleasure out of its suffering. They are the better-off, unable to empathise with the circumstances of the worse-off. The mare is Raskolnikov, unable to move or prove himself within this framework. In the dream, his young self stands afar and feels a sense of empathy for the mare. The dream comes to Raskolnikov much later, drawing an apparent parallel between his condition and that of the mare.

Raskolnikov, symbolically represented as the mare, is flogged to death owing to his complete inability to cope with the roles he is meant to fulfil in society as a student and son. It hinders the process of lifting the cart and conversely provides an avenue for the townsmen and Mikolka to derive sadistic pleasure out of the act of killing it. Once again, the principle of collectivity withstands. No one within the larger conscience holds Mikolka or the drunk townsmen in contempt. It exemplifies a case of Group Polarisation, allowing a collective frenzy of thought to reinstate ways of condemning supposed lethargy and inactivity. The mare is flogged, forced to move, and disallowed even a second of respite. Mikolka labels the mare as his property, further accentuating the fault line within the capitalist framework which alienates individuals and living beings as objects meant to be commod-

11 See Varma, Prasad Vishwanath. "Gandhi and Marx." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1954, pp. 115-133. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41853789.pdf>

12 Raskolnikov's sister, a mirror to his personality in terms of being individualistic while also exhibiting differing qualities by being highly responsible, level-headed, and having feminist values.

ified. It is this framework that Raskolnikov places himself against.

The other dream preempts Raskolnikov's meeting with Svidrigailov,¹⁴ representing an attempt to establish will and reason and a consequent failure of the attempt.¹⁵ Once again, the dream comes to Raskolnikov seemingly out of nowhere, symptomatic of his inability to unravel the jumbled thread of his thoughts:

He wasn't thinking about anything. There was just the odd random thought or scrap of thought, or the odd image without rhyme or reason: faces seen by him back in his childhood or people he'd met only once and would never have recalled again. (Dostoyevsky 481)

Everything seems to come to him as he drifts into an anxious half-asleep oblivion, as if triggered post rigorous intellectual labour:

'The hag's neither here nor there!' he thought impetuously. 'Maybe she's the mistake here – maybe it's not about her at all! She was only the sickness . . . I was in such a hurry to step right over . . . I didn't murder a person, I murdered a principle. (Dostoyevsky 483)

The principle, here, is once again the reiteration of the same societal framework that Raskolnikov's intellectual capabilities strive to contest. It is emblematic of the weighing of lives which render young students like Raskolnikov devoid of any material support while keeping personalities like the pawnbroker, Luzhin, or Svidrigailov financially comfortable and warm in correspondence with the ambitions of a money-driven society. As the dream progresses¹⁶ Raskolnikov views the pawnbroker as an enduring force, laughing in a numb inaudible manner, while the entire apartment complex is brimming with people observing and looking. The encircling of the framework is represented by the pawnbroker unsuccessfully tussling with Raskolnikov and his axe. Through the examination of such instances of feverish, highly symbolic dreams, sleep as a tool to blur the divide between the isolated and socialised self can be analysed. The isolated entity is situated at the frays of the modern, societal framework while the socialised self is held and pushed deeper into it. One becomes conscious of Raskolnikov's inability to bring the two into a revisioned or reconciled state. He stands with all those who find themselves living in material as well as psychological marginalisation. However, despite their ability to see through the alienation of the system, they lack a will or vision to alter it.

3.3. Seeking Alternatives

Raskolnikov proves to be an embodied critique of slowly-emerging modern society. His vivid dreams and disturbed sleep accompany a series of events which start off with his crime and then extend to a complete detachment

13 Referring to the psychological concept of Group Polarisation wherein a group is susceptible to make decisions and engage in behaviours which otherwise each individual will refrain from. See Proietti, Carlo. "The Dynamics of Group Polarization." *International Workshop on Logic, Rationality and Interaction*, August 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319258917_The_Dynamics_of_Group_Polarization

14 Svidrigailov's character is intended to represent the moral greyness of the novel. Having committed various crimes with impunity, Svidrigailov is the symbol of enigmatic evil. He is in love with Dunya, an aspect that allows the reader to view him with a sympathetic gaze. In the novel's ending chapters, Svidrigailov dies of suicide.

15 See Wasiolek, Edward. "On the Structure of Crime and Punishment." *PMLA*, vol. 74, no. 1, March 1959, pp. 131-136. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/460394>.

from his family as well as the crafting of an identity which refuses to see itself as a part of the collective. ⁴² He realises that relationships around him have always been transactional and conditional, further cemented by the domestic set-up— “He felt dreadful. Had he only been able to go off somewhere there and then and be entirely alone, even if it were for the rest of his life, he’d have thought himself lucky” (Dostoyevsky 741). These lines immediately follow Sonya’s gesture of taking Raskolnikov’s hands in hers, a simple yet profound move embedded in an unalienated relationship. It allows one to view the other beyond morality and a character merely relational to the society. In no way does Sonya devote herself to a form of love which is blind to the gravity of the crime that Raskolnikov has committed, but she realises that humiliation, abandonment, and a constant emphasis on the discussion of one’s mental and physical conditions is in no way fetching a rehabilitative result. There is not one instance, except post the death of Marmeladov,¹⁷ when Sonya visits Raskolnikov at his garret. It is Raskolnikov who, through his distaste for human company, feels himself naturally inclined towards Sonya who, in her non-partisan and freeing capacity for affection, gives him the space to realise his human essence and allows him to exist in shades of moral greyness.

For this reading of the text however, one must focus on the duality of sleep. The respite and refreshment associated with sleep is available only to those who own the modes of production,¹⁸ and only they have an ability to dictate morality and justice. Initially, sleep and a dimmed consciousness of sensation and stimulated thought was an outlet for Raskolnikov to resolve the confusion of the trajectory of overlapping events¹⁹ in the narrative and his own split selves. Another side of sleep came into practice when he realised that sleep is inversely a method to impose absence of awareness— “In fact, he was glad to have work to do: exhausting himself physically, he at least earned himself a few hours’ untroubled sleep” (Dostoyevsky 899). The correlation is basic — when one is exhausted due to hours of automatised labour put into acquiring means of subsistence, they are repeatedly pushed to the point of exhaustion and a complete incapacity of being aware of their conditions, let alone questioning them. The subsistence guaranteed is negligible, instigating a struggle for basic necessities.

Thus, an inertial state of sleep hinders the constantly mobile nature of capitalistic frameworks which allow rest and non-work only to a few. Alienation becomes rampant as humans find themselves to be part of a collective, playing into the narrative of perceived individuality. However, they are actually surveilled and discouraged with negative reinforcement if they are to express any essence of individuality. This is the problem that arises when one seeks to envision an alternative framework. While that would mean a collapse of society itself, it becomes integral to alter and rework current paradigms. Razumikhin appears as a possible pathway to fit into the system and consciously rewire it. That too, however, is susceptible to being enveloped by the same systems without answering questions of welfare, access, disparity, depravity, and means of distribution. Raskolnikov’s character proves that in order to form a vocabulary around questioning existing ways of living, visualising a fault line is a must. His criminal act in itself, as mentioned earlier, was an isolated act. It raises questions regarding crime seen as a series

16 The dream occurs just before the end of the third part, culminating in descriptions of Raskolnikov’s mental state. In a state of oblivion, Raskolnikov finds himself walking dazed in the street but being aware of someone following him. He ends up at the apartment where he committed the murder, climbs up the stairs and finds the old hag hiding behind a hanging coat. The dream incites a bone-chilling reaction, not just because of the senseless and numb manner in which the corpse of the old lady laughs, or the scene within a scene outline, but also because of its very real and perplexing quality. The revelation that all that was described was a dream is written with profundity, complementing the cold abruptness of Svidrigailov’s entry into the novel.

17 An alcoholic and a former public servant, Marmeladov meets Raskolnikov in a debilitated tavern. He is destitute, with his daughter, Sonya, selling herself to feed the family. His death is perhaps the most tragic moment in the novel. Trampled by a carriage, his death represents the meaninglessness of existence. Marmeladov’s family is left orphaned and poor. His wife, the feisty Katerina Ivanovna, dies and their children are ultimately rescued by Svidrigailov’s money and indirect charity.

of isolated acts arising out of an abstract immorality as opposed to the consequence of an errored system. While the realisation of crime as a response to alienation and inequality of the society might be present and aware in the collective subconscious, it is nowhere mirrored in the prison system. The system of punishment inevitably repeats the same thought patterns of imposing reflection and realisation of guilt on the criminal in terms of solitary confinement and forced labour, as opposed to a restorative way of rehabilitating the individual. Thus, the mechanisms and schools of thought which have kept these systems in place must be brought under scrutiny.

4. Morality Frameworks as Means of Control

Dostoyevsky makes Raskolnikov pose a utopian, utilitarian²⁰ motive—the fundamental premise of human life being inherently valuable, even if placed against the supposed material advancement of comparatively disadvantaged persons. The preceding sections, with their analysis of the constriction of sleep to examine the ramifications of and resistance to a larger social structure, can lead into an examination of the implications of the ideology of utilitarianism as well. After all, the main question posited by the novel relates to the intrinsic value of someone's material and economical existence and how that disturbs the subsistence and dignity of someone else's life. While this was an abstract contention in the mind of Raskolnikov, it nevertheless raises questions of morality. The most common understanding of morality stems from an inclination to sacrifice one's preferences, desires, and utilities for another person, or for gratifying a later purpose. It also relates to certain collectively ascertained standards of goodness and sacrifice which relate to a dimming of consciousness. Ultimately, it prevents the self from aiming for an improvement to one's current conditions. Thus, it reinstates a profound ignorance of the self and the world.

Nietzsche delineates the cultural task of the modern world as breeding a tame, civilised animal—a household pet. According to him, humans have placed themselves on a “false rank” in comparison to animals, endowing themselves with “fictitious attributes” (Ansell-Pearson xvi). Human habit gravitates towards inventing tables of goodness and establishing them as eternal and unconditional. The person is in continuous pursuit to become better, more comfortable, more indifferent, and more mediocre; with the taming becoming an end in itself. On the surface, modern society is set on the pretext of the free individual as the superior entity, transcending forces of nature and other forms of life. However, at a deeper level, what is endorsed is only a particular form of individuality—that which is devoted to attaining freedom through never-ending devotion to a life of monetary employment. This devotion immediately lends itself to a realisation of morality based on subscription to certain standards and roles—son, wife, the working man, etc. The social structure given to us feeds us an idea of freedom that is unattainable and improperly conceived, entailing employment, ambition, and the family as a social unit as ideal achievements. If not these, the evaluations of people who want to live their life in alternative ways are socially exclusionary. More often than not, these standards and roles are always set in stone by the ones at the top of the social hierarchy, for whom the moral framework is altogether absent.

The common discourse around criminality and its relation with morality have remained a part of the state of affairs within a particular framework of morality without expanding its possibilities. Nietzsche derives his theory of the bad conscience by placing emphasis on the culture of modernity, defining it as the serious condition to

18 In a few words, this strong point of Marxian theory can be summed up as follows: (a) it highlights a sequence of different production modes that arose at various steps in history (the mode of the ancients, feudalism, capitalism, etc.) and thereby suggests that capitalism can barely be the last link in this chain; (b) it shows that the mechanisms governing the development of each production mode obey specific laws and rules and that individual behaviour is greatly affected by the way production is organised.

19 While the novel in itself is systematic owing to its serialisation, Raskolnikov's state of mind is suffused with confusion and an inability to mark out specific points, days, and evenings-owing to post-crime trauma and an injured capacity for recollection.

which man succumbs due to fundamental changes in society and its confining space:

Nietzsche advances, albeit in a preliminary fashion, his own theory on the ‘origin’ of the bad conscience. He looks upon it ‘as a serious illness to which man was forced to succumb by the pressure of the most fundamental of all changes which he experienced’. This change refers to the establishment of society and peace and their confining spaces, which brings with it a suspension and devaluation of the instincts. Nietzsche writes of the basic instinct of freedom – the will to power – being forced back and repressed... Human beings now walk as if a ‘terrible heaviness’ bears down on them. (Ansell-Pearson xxiii)

Further, Nietzsche also talks about the employment of an active bad conscience which can be a repository of imaginative and ideal events. This, however, is difficult to conceptualise because of the internalisation of a creditor-debtor relationship of viewing morality, with certain classes governing the indoctrinated into an obligation of abstract repayment. One works to repay the master just like one fulfils their role in a family so as to repay the minimal sustenance provided by the patriarch. The internalisation of guilt moves to an asceticism that forces the individual to adopt debilitating standards of living. Morality and guilt entrap the imagination, forming the perfect mechanism to keep the slave or the working vessel stagnated and stratified:

A deed can be carried out in a consummate, highly resourceful fashion, but the subject’s control over his actions, the basis of his actions, is disturbed and depends on various morbid impressions. As if he were dreaming. (Dostoyevsky 407)

There’s almost no such thing as a well-balanced person. You might find one in a hundred, or one in several hundred thousand, and even then only a fairly weak specimen... (Dostoyevsky 408)

Sleep, and the dreams that come with it, allow humans to traverse the boundaries of a blank world, realise instinctual natures, and raise questions regarding subsistence. The real world is characterised by a dichotomy between what one wants and what is expected, an endeavour where the self is always lost. Sleep and non-work are the antithesis to that endeavour. They bring to notice the blurred quality of living: where there is no clarity to one’s existence; sleep and taking a step back is a way to attain that clarity. However, the same sleep can be merely physical, an area the capitalist modern society is well-equipped to perfect. Sleep is merely an outlet to restore productivity in an economic capacity under capitalist logic, as opposed to moulding a subjective agency.

5. Conclusion

This study presents a critique of modern society via the evocation of the role of sleep, non-work, and excessive rationality, which are in no way a form of convenient idealism that celebrates lethargy, in *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov represents a form of individuality and intellectual excessiveness which speaks of a subjective agency that is self-aware but unable to find appropriate solutions to surrounding issues. By reading all the possible shades of Raskolnikov’s reclusion and inaction as a conscious step away from the systems ingrained in a collective psyche, this study directly challenges a system that lends to the farcical championing of estranged uniformity under the garb of individuality. Crime and inaction become a way to tackle that estrangement as well as counter and reduce material discrepancies. Dostoyevsky allows a specific critique of society in terms of relationships and the collective, which is reinterpreted in mainly anti-capitalist and unalienated terms. The reconciliation that the novelist provides is that life, its trajectory, and the actions with which one paints it are all inherently meaningless. The only way to then find meaning is to fight for the self both materially and psychologically.

20 Utilitarianism, as propounded by John Stuart Mill, reiterates the necessity of actions that are pleasurable to the mind as well as the importance of helping others as a means of maximising an individual's good. Mill justifies moral experiences and deeds as being useful to human welfare. Raskolnikov's thought-out decision to commit murder goes against the motives of utilitarianism. By flouting moral norms, Raskolnikov questions the idea of material discrepancies and how morality strives to ignore them.

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Tracing and Decoding Rain in Tagore's Poetry

Navneet Kaur

Abstract

This paper examines the employment of rain as a recurring image, metaphor, symbol and trope in Tagore's poetry by looking at its varying usages, connotations and effects. Much of Tagore's poetry is entrenched in the usage of symbols rooted in the pristine, untouched beauty of nature. The aim of the paper is to delineate the relationship between Tagore and his external surroundings through his musings on rain and establish him as a poet who had a great understanding of the usage of metaphors in literature. For simplifying its explanation, the paper will primarily deal with the significant poem "It hasn't rained in my heart" and bring in references from other poems by Tagore too. The paper is divided into various subsections which separately deal with different themes. The final section of the paper will draw the culminating interconnectedness of the metaphor of rain, in the poems discussed. The paper will culminate by showing the relevance of Tagore's metaphor of rain through the study of his poetry and interpreting it in varying lights.

Keywords: Metaphor, nature, Tagore, rain, Romanticism.

1. Introduction

Radhey L. Varshney remarks on Tagore: "To consider Shakespeare or Kalidasa or Tagore without his imagery would be to turn a Titan into a pigmy" (87). Imagery is hence a potent reference point to begin general discussions around Tagore's poetry. Within literary criticism, imagery is used to understand the functional relationship between the meanings derived from a piece of work and all the elements of a powerful imagery like the descriptions, metaphors, similes etc. Thus, images are loaded vehicles that are a culmination of a tedious synthesis and are often used in critical modes of analysis, as and when applied to different authors.

Tagore's poetry and imagery within it, has been often referred to as sentimental and romantic: "Tagore is a romanticist by temperament too. He drew inspiration from Keats, the celebrated romantic poet of England" (Gupta). His hallmark of being a nature poet is well known among literary circles. However, this argument implies a certain sense of reductionism, wherein all poems of Tagore only get relegated to the category of "nature poetry" without an examination of the deeper implications of the symbols and tropes unique to his work. The Indian literary field is devoid of concrete theories compared to movements like European Romanticism, which is evident in Tagore's predominant identity as a nature poet, giving form to erasure to a certain extent. This paper deviates from such reductionism by studying Tagore's imagery and metaphors around rain through an intersection of critical theory and literary criticism.

2. Materialism and Spiritualism

¹ Structuralism looks at relationships between the various elements within the self-contained structure of the text to understand the ways by which text produces meaning. It focuses on things like form, vocabulary, setting, voice and their combination. Here, the word 'rain' denotes the literal presence of it within the sentence structure, but the setting of horizon is barren around.

Tagore uses the literal presence of rain in the following lines to show the material absence of rain from the horizon: “The rain has held back for days and days ... / The horizon is fiercely naked...” (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 70). The rain in its form and vocabulary exists in the poem, but lacks in the sphere of the horizon. He uses a paradoxical binary between presence and absence of this symbol of fecundity: the rain. A structuralist¹ point of view renders such curious usage as symbolic of Tagore’s insistence on word play and vocabulary. In another poem, “New Rain”, the poet shares a pathological description, wherein his heart starts rejoicing when raindrops touch him. The pathology of it is entrenched in the fact that the body of the poet was marred by inactivity before it began raining, but when raindrops arrive, his heart becomes active. An external stimulus like rain produces an internal reaction:

the rain patters on the new leaves of summer,
the tremor of the crickets’ chirp troubles the shade of the tree,
the river overflows its bank washing the village meadows.
My heart dances. (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 40)

The pathological and clinical effect that the rain drops produce are suggestive of the inherent material power that Tagore believed creatures and creations had within themselves. Helal Uddin Ahmed aptly reverberates this idea in his essay “Spiritualism in Tagore’s Poetry”:

He held the view that the route to spiritual development was from ‘body to society, from society to totality and from totality to the spiritual domain’. In this way, the melody of the soul was intertwined with the universal power. (Ahmed)

Thus, for Tagore, the happiness produced by an abiotic component like rain was the first stepping stone for achieving ultimate spiritual development. The tangibility of ‘rain’ as a cause produces a material effect in the heart, visible in how his heart starts beating fast, which would then ultimately cause spiritual growth. Tagore’s materialism is of a kind wherein he allows himself to become vulnerable enough so that natural creations around him, affect him directly. This is evident in poems in which he uses the trope of rain to describe the condition of his pensive heart. In song 18 of the *Gitanjali*, the reason for his heart being languished is ascribed to rain and the long wait of his God:

If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside,
I know not how I am to pass these long, rainy hours.
I keep gazing on the far away gloom of the sky,
and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind. (*Gitanjali* 45)

Thus, Tagore uses materialist² metaphors like “rainy hours” to describe a general gloominess in the spiritual landscape of his heart where he is in search of encountering an exquisite form of his Almighty. Before him, Romantics also used materialistic notions to describe effects of external surroundings on the internal human body. Rain as a symbol of fluidity acts as a killjoy and hindrance and escapes the concreteness of form that Tagore’s speaker in the poem is yearning to see in his God. The longing to see his face is symbolic of his paradoxical desire to encounter a monotheistic God and yet revel in the fluidity of the formless rain. Tagore inherits this tendency

² Materialism, here, has been used as an extension of a philosophical notion that considers all universal phenomena including cognitive occurrences in our mind as an occurrence due to the matter that constitutes the universe.

from Sufism and Bhakti traditions of Medievalism, both of which also likened their Gods to materialist symbols like clouds, rain or animals. Niaz Ahmed Khan's translation of Rumi's poem highlights the affinity between Sufism and Tagore:

It is the love that simmers the sea like boiler
 It is the love that grinds the mountain unto sand
 It is the love that tears sky into hundred parts
 It is the love that tremors the earth with its extravagance (Khan 82)

Rumi's love and Tagore's heart are similar in the sense that both of them are afflicted by the common pain of separation from their Gods and both of them use symbols of fluidity like rain, sea and sky to extrapolate that pain. Thus, the material always exists in a dialectic between the spiritual in Tagore. Despite this dialecticism, Tagore always believed in the unity of being where the spiritual co-existed with the material, if not in harmony, at least in tension:

Tagore believes in the unity of being so he looks for the eternal beloved in paddy field in season's changes, in rain drops, in the sunlight, in nature's manifestations and melody of flute that gives traces of dancing presence of Bideshani the unknown beloved ever shying away but intimately close to heart and soul.
 (Khan 88)

3. Modernity and Alternative forms of Thinking

Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans, or in the hideous structures where their children are interned when they take their lessons.... These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. (Tagore qtd. in Dasgupta)

A passionate critic of Western modernity, Tagore believed that Western modernity was a liberal garb of colonialist expansion that had engulfed India. His notion of modernity moved past basic concerns of wealth to incorporate higher realms of understanding like ethics and philosophy. He elaborates on this view in his essay "Nationalism in India":

In my country, we have been seeking to find out something common to all races, which will prove their real unity. No nation looking for a mere political or commercial basis of unity will find such a solution sufficient. Men of thought and power will discover the spiritual unity, will realize it, and preach it. (26)

Thus, Tagore critiqued the scientific basis of Western modernity which made objectivity of thinking as its central tenet. In his writings on rain, he affirms his reliance on a register and jargon of fluidity, locomotion and movement. This is evident in verse 60 of *Gitanjali*:

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.
 The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous.
 On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances. (*Gitanjali* 85)

Tagore's employment of words like "seashore", "sand", "sea", "rain", and "clouds" is a panorama of the life of water which flows without constraints and predetermined stereotypes. Tagore's usage of rain as a metaphor and trope escapes the shackles of terrestrial modernity of the West and embraces the free-flowing waters of the Indian Ocean. His writing through the mediation of rain is an alternative way of re-imagining the goals of civilization. Arko Dasgupta affirms this view by saying that Tagore resented the way cities like San Francisco were designed with railways, bridges and expressways and no space was left for the enrichment of modern society. Tagore thus uses the metaphor of rain as his way of reimagining an alternative way of living. In "Paper Boats", Tagore projects an archetype of such a mode of living. The boy floats down his paper boats in rain and winds hoping that someone in a strange land would come to know of his identity:

Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down the running stream. In big black letters I write my name on them and the name of the village where I live.
I hope that someone in some strange land will find them and know who I am. (Tagore qtd. in "Paper Boats")

All through Tagore's poems concerned with rain, there is an underlying opposition to the fixity of modernity that was propagated by the West. In "Paper Boats", the rain and the stream are mediators that give the young boy a sense of momentary joy by helping him float his own boat and dream of spreading his name all across the water and with it the identity of the simplistic way of the East.

4. Tagore, Romanticism and the Sublime

This field of comparative appraisal is perhaps too widely extended- so much so that the poems of Gitanjali have been compared to the work of almost all the living or dead poets on Earth, from Sappho to T.S Eliot. (Shahane 54)

Romanticism as a movement became prominent in Europe and France in particular, during the end of the eighteenth century and deep into the mid nineteenth century. It marked the primacy of subjectivity, imagination and intuition as opposed to reason. Tagore has often been likened to this Western artistic and literary movement. He was greatly interested in the Romantics and was fond of Byron and Shelley. He once remarked:

There was another such day in English Literature when the slow-measure of Pope's common time gave place to the dance-rhythm of the French Revolution. This had Byron for its poet. And the impetuosity of his passion also moved our veiled heart-bride in the seclusion of her corner. (Tagore qtd. in Shahane 55)

Within American Romanticism, transcendentalism³ was a crucial operating idea. Considering Tagore's own philosophy of religion, there was a hybridity between Tagore and the theory of transcendentalism. Tagore's conception of religion was tied within a unity of being. According to him, religion was a uniting force in terms of solidarity among people but also upheld spiritual integrity of a person. Religion for him was "hence" a force

³ "Transcendentalism has its origins in New England of the early 1800s and the birth of Unitarianism. It was born from a debate between "New Light" theologians, who believed that religion should focus on an emotional experience, and "Old Light" opponents, who valued reason in their religious approach. Transcendentalists advocated the idea of a personal knowledge of God, believing that no intermediary was needed for spiritual insight. They embraced idealism, focusing on nature and opposing materialism." (Brodrick)

that kept the soul and body united and together. Radha Chakravarty explains in the essay “The Great Fair of Common Human Life: Re-reading Gitanjali” how Tagore’s poems highlight the mutuality of bond between the human and the divine. For instance, Tagore believed that nature was the most sacred place for pilgrimage and that the changes occurring in nature were divine manifestations. Transcendentalism also focused on such a unity of being.

The Romantics also used elements from their immediate surroundings to lay bare human condition. Wordsworth resided in the Lake district along with Robert Southey and others. Casual strolls along rivers and gardens produced divine inspiration in them. Wordsworth’s poem on recollections of the Wye river valley titled “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” was a product of such inspiration from immediate surroundings.

Tagore followed a similar method of writing in the way his surroundings affected him to write and indulge in rain poetry. Radhey L. Varshney testifies to this in his essay:

The preference which Tagore gives to water imagery may be attributed to his close association with his motherland, Bengal which is the land of water, of rivers and the sea. Tagore watched the rivers and the sea closely; he loved them, and was impressed by their beauty and occasionally saddened by the destruction and damage done by the flooding rivers in the rainy season. (Varshney 95)

Critics also corroborate that in many of the letters he wrote to his niece Indira Devi, later published as *Chhina Patra*, 1912 [Torn Letter] or *Glimpses of Bengal*, he explains a lot of things by using the symbol of rain. The following excerpt from “Shahzadpur, 1890” in *Glimpses of Bengal* is a testimony to it:

As I returned home, great black clouds came up and there was a terrific storm with torrents of rain. I could not touch a book, it was impossible to write, so in the I-know-not-what mood I wandered about from room to room. It had become quite dark, the thunder was continually pealing, the lightning gleaming flash after flash, and every now and then sudden gusts of wind would get hold of the big lichi tree by the neck and give its shaggy top a thorough shaking. (“Shahzadpur 1890” 1)

Historians like Uma Das Gupta believe that he often stayed in a houseboat on the Padma River which is one of the main channels of the Ganges, in close contact with village folk. It would rain heavily over there considering the influence of cyclones in Bay of Bengal and the South-West Monsoons⁴ which would flood the Padma river at times. Rain and river are continuing metaphors in all the works that Tagore wrote during his stay at Shilaidaha. Tagore’s usage of rain as a continuing trope in his poetry was also a culmination of the twin traditions of literary and sociological criticism⁵ and Romanticism.

For more than a decade, in the years 1889-1900 Rabindranath Tagore spent more time on the river than on land. The river was the mighty Padma, a tributary of the Ganga. Rabindranath was 28 years old and went to take charge of agricultural estates along the river Padma in East Bengal and also in Cuttack district of Orissa. Tagore was stationed at Shelaidaha but travelled to the other estates in the family houseboat called the ‘Padma Boat’. (Das Gupta qtd. in Dandekar)

4 The southwest monsoon derives its name from winds which blow from a south-westerly direction in the Indian subcontinent. They visit India during the summers and bring in bounty of rains for the irrigation of crops.

5 Sociological criticism employs the usage of a writer’s background and societal context to interpret texts.

In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke identified the sublime as the experience of the infinite, which is terrifying and thrilling because it threatens to overpower the assumed importance of human enterprise in the universe. Thus, the sublime was anything that was beautiful yet terrifying and undermining at the same time. Tagore's rain takes on the sublime emotion in a lot of his poems. In the poem "The Oarsmen" in his book *Fruit Gathering*, rain is likened to the coming of death:

Do you hear the tumult of death afar,
 the call midst the fire-floods and poisonous clouds
 The Captain's call to the steersman to turn the ship to an unnamed shore,
 For that time is over—the stagnant time in the port —
 Where the same old merchandise is brought and sold in an endless round,
 Where dead things drift in the exhaustion and emptiness of truth-
 The clouds have blotted away the stars. . . •
 All the black evils in the world have overflowed their banks. (Tagore qtd. in Varshney 94)

Tagore's juxtaposition of rain with a subliminal emotion like death shows the preoccupation of the poet-writer with philosophical questions of higher being. Rain acts as an intermediary to posit questions related to death and being. In another untitled poem from his book *Crossing*, the rain has been depicted as a source of sublime:

Is it the Destroyer who comes?
 For the boisterous sea of tears heaves in the flood-tide of pain.
 The crimson clouds run wild in the wind lashed by lightning,
 and the thundering laughter of the
 Mad is over the sky.
 Life sits in the chariot frowned by Death. . . . (Tagore qtd. in Varshney 95)

All such instances suggest that Tagore was well-versed with Western theory and conceptions. However, rather than blindly applying them as a blueprint onto his poems, he likened such conceptions to the suitability of his geography and setting in the poems. His frequent thought-exchanges with W.B Yeats stands as a testimony to the fact that Western and Indian conceptions were regularly exchanged. Rain here becomes a prominent symbol of this, a localised phenomenon becoming a universal metaphor.

5. Conclusion

The arguments aimed at extending the scholarship on Tagore's works, particularly on the symbol of rain in his poetry. His focus on the beauty of nature, was all pervading. Tagore's poetry, which most often gets reduced to mere immediate concerns of nature is studied here through the lenses of sociological criticism, Romantic theory, structuralism and religious philosophy, and they bring to light a new complexity and fluidity in the poet's works. The basic force behind all the arguments was an effort to understand Tagore's usage of rain imagery through its functional, theoretical and practical uses.

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Transcultural Feminine Sensibility in Kimiko Hahn's *Mosquito and Ant* (1999)

Rusha Chowdhury

Abstract

In this paper, Kimiko Hahn's poetry has been read as a self-conscious attempt to topple the patriarchal overtones of American English and construct a version of *écriture féminine*, as Hélène Cixous understands it, by incorporating the poetic and literary sensibilities of women writers from the East Asian tradition, as embodied by the *Nu Shu* tradition from China and *zuihitsu* writers from Heian Japan, with the confessional mode. Using such a formalist analysis, this paper focuses on Hahn's identity as an Asian-American, middle-class working mother whose preoccupations with grief, her sexuality and aging body, and her position in a society circumscribed by patriarchal gender roles prompt her to trace her literary lineage through her poetry and rediscover her sense of self in homo-social bonds between women.

Keywords: Asian-American Literature, feminism, grief, transcultural identity, sexuality.

1. Introduction

In her seminal work, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Hélène Cixous begins by asserting that a woman should write about herself and other women in order to bring them into a traditionally phallogocentric literary canon that has worked incessantly to ensure their violent alienation both from literature and their own bodies. She emphasizes on women's struggle against the masculinist conventions that pervade the process of communication and meaning-making which, in effect, engender codes that invariably negate and objectify women. She talks about women's entry into the praxis of literature in terms of the liberation and assertion of their erotogeneity. The burden of shame that has hitherto been imposed upon women for expressing themselves, their identities and bodies must be overthrown by the act of writing. Cixous talks about "female-sexed texts" that truly speak to the concerns and experiences of women (877). She urges her readers to bring their suppressed childhood back from their unconscious, which would, in effect, unfold the machinations of the patriarchal ideology that imposes codes of femininity upon women to repress and negate their identities. Throughout the essay, one of the central issues that Cixous raises is that it is within the locus of literature that the repression of women has been perpetuated, making it a place where they have not been given the chance to speak. It is, therefore, necessary for women to take up the task of writing to replace the codes that work against them. She coins the term "*écriture féminine*" (Cixous 875) to indicate a system of inscription outside the phallogocentrism¹ of the dominant patriarchal language. Although Cixous recognizes the impossibility of defining a feminine practice of writing since the very acts of defining and theorizing would bind it in the same patriarchal structures of meaning, she asserts its existence and potential to surpass masculinist discursive systems.

Looking at a curious precedent of similar resonances in East Asian women's literary traditions, Kimiko Hahn composes *Mosquito and Ant* (1999), a collection of epistolary poems and *zuihitsu* in the style and spirit of

¹ Phallogocentrism— a compound of the terms phallogocentrism and logocentrism— is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida which indicates the privileging of the masculine in language and meaning making.

a homosocial practice of correspondence once prevalent among women in the Hunan Province of China through an exclusively feminine dialect known as *Nu Shu*. As an Asian-American poet, she talks about her life in America through these Sino-Japanese modes of articulation. She combines Eastern literary forms with Western feminist and postcolonial discourses, thereby establishing a transcultural conversation between women's traditions across space and time.

2. Literary Forms and Traditions behind *Mosquito and Ant*

In her book, Hahn employs three forms of composition, two of which pertain to Chinese and Japanese women's literature. The anchoring form that holds the collection together is the epistolary poetic tradition of *Nu Shu*, a secret language. Although it is still to be surmised as to when the dialect had originated, *Nu Shu* is believed to have been in use in the small county of Jiangyong in the southern-most part of Hunan since around 900 AD, and had reached its peak during the Qing Dynasty in the 17th century. One of the legends concerning the origin of the dialect speaks of a local girl named Yuxiu, who was sent to Emperor Song Huizong as a concubine, but being unable to win his favour, is said to have created the *Nu Shu* script to give voice to her misery and warn families against sending their daughters to the palace. In this originary myth, one notices the woman's inability to express her sorrow in the existing androcentric language, which eventually gives way to the formulation of a different script to encapsulate her feelings (Liu 246). Similar to Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine*, this script existed apart from the dominant *hanzi* script, which was not usually taught to the women of Jiangyong. Moreover, the necessity to create a new script for expression in the absence of formal education in *hanzi* itself depicts what Cixous visualizes as the feminine unconscious pouring forth, voices encapsulating their drive for creativity and aesthetic engagement.

The term, *Nu Shu*, itself can be translated to 'women's script.' Foot-bound women in Imperial China had limited opportunities for mobility as they were relegated to the private household space. Fei-Wen Liu observes that:

Until the communist takeover, the upper Jiangyong . . . was characterized by the Confucian androcentric practices of patrilineality, patrilocality, and a village-based agrarian economy, with women defined by the ideology of *sancong* 三從 (thrice-following)—that is, female status was derived from relationships with father, husband, and sons. Subject to strict gender-based labor divisions, women were viewed as “inner persona” whose duties focused on household chores and needlework rather than fieldwork, especially when footbinding was a widespread practice. Unmarried women were referred to as “upstairs girls,” since they spent most of their time in groups doing embroidery and weaving in second-story rooms. These social gatherings supported the learning of *Nu Shu* script, sung laments, and stories. (Liu 246)

They would perform various household chores, spin, weave, and engage in embroidery. Moreover, the custom of foot-binding would limit their ability to move around freely. So, they gathered in private chambers to engage in the shared task of embroidery and sang *nuge* (女歌), or women's songs composed in *Nu Shu*, enabling the transmission of the script across generations (Idema 5). These Chinese women composed ballads, moral tracts, and wrote epistolary poems which were exchanged between women who had entered into a social relationship of sworn sisterhood. They called each other *laotong*, binding themselves in a lifelong spiritual bond.

The second form that Hahn uses is the Japanese *zuihitsu*, following the precedent of Sei Shonagon's

Heian-period literary classic, *The Pillow Book* (1002). In a 2006 interview with Laurie Sheck, Hahn talks of the *zuihitsu* as “a species unto itself” (5). It is neither poem nor prose, nor does it have an exact Western equivalent. It is often autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, comprising a cluster of passages written at random. In Heian Japan, though noble women were segregated and their exposure to the male gaze was highly regulated, the court ladies engaged in literature, composing in *hiragana*— the script of the commoners— as Chinese, the standard language of composition, was accessible only to men. This non-linear composition in hiragana was referred to as *onnade* or ‘woman’s hand’². Although the *hiragana* was not an exclusive script used by women, their profusion in the same attributed the script to the feminine sphere. In the *zuihitsu*, “The Downpour”, Hahn speaks of writers such as Ono no Komachi, Lady Ise, Sei Shonagon, Murasaki Shikibu and Izumi Shikibu. “The language invigorated the literature, made the bloodless literature flush, and was *so dominated by women, their sensibility became the aesthetic*” (Hahn 32; emphasis added). In this very script, Sei Shonagon documented both the practices in the Heian court and her personal reflections on the events and incidents around her. *The Pillow Book*, especially the section on “Hateful Things”, shows a remarkable strain of intimacy in Shonagon’s composition.

The third form that Hahn uses is the confessional poetic mode in free verse as used by American feminist poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The feminist confessional has been an integral mode of articulation of the personal experiences of women that are brought to the public sphere, “making private knowledge a public truth for women readers” through autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature, especially with the second wave of feminism coming in the 1960s and its blaring slogan, “Personal is political” (Blaha 44). Hahn identifies a similar strain in the aforementioned East Asian traditions that created an opportunity for bringing the voices of women to the fore to narrate female existence, constantly driven deep into the unconscious by overarching patriarchal narratives. Cixous holds that the woman’s unconscious is impregnable and even if her true identity and desires are driven out of her conscious mind, they remain in her unconscious, waiting to pour forth. In her words:

[P]oetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffmann would say, fairies. (Cixous 879-880)

Hahn, too, recognizes the importance of writing for a woman, irrespective of her racial, cultural and ethnic identity; her act of documentation works to historicize the lives of women, which is necessary to accord them subjectivity.

In the paratextual notes, Hahn writes that *Mosquito and Ant* refers to the slender and elongated *Nu Shu* characters that are distinct from the dominant Chinese script (Hahn 83). The description of the script in terms of insect physiology highlights its marginality in androcentric Jiangyong (Liu 246). Her collection pays homage to the several “immortal sisters” (Hahn 3)— a term she borrows from Thomas Cleary’s anthology of literature composed by Taoist female adepts in medieval China. These women have time and again occupied positions of subversion and dissidence in a repressive patriarchal society. Her poems document her reading of Taoist women saints, such as Sun-Buer, who had overcome patriarchal suppression established and perpetuated in East Asia by state Confucianism that has time and again emphasized on the inferiority of women. The *Analects of Confucius* had defined the role of the woman as witless, passive procreator of heirs while the man is hailed as the head of the

² For more information about the evolution of *zuihitsu*, see “Women and the Evolution of Writing.” *Travel Through Time: Allison’s History Blog*, 22 Jan. 2021, <https://historynavigator.org/2021/01/22/women-and-the-evolution-of-writing/>.

family³. They had broken away from the traditional family structure to cultivate their inner alchemy, becoming teachers of great renown. Cleary notes that Taoism, with its reverence of the feminine principle, accorded women a space for self-realization through alchemical practices (Cleary ix). However, Western sociological reception, especially by Max Weber, as Cleary points out, has distorted the perception of the feminine element enshrined in Taoism. To quote Cleary:

Weber characterizes Confucianism as “masculine rationality” and Taoism as “feminine hysteria,” but if the masculine/feminine polarity has any relevance at all in this context, it might be more historically accurate to characterize Confucianism as “masculine authoritarianism” and Taoism as “feminine nurture,” this in a practical sense in both the social and higher psychological domains. (Cleary xiii)

A lot of these adepts had to endure marital contentions earlier in life, as exemplified by the tale of the Holy Mother of Dongling⁴, yet they managed to transcend their material situation. Hahn accords a similar reverence to the women around her, whom she celebrates for their tenacity in the face of society.

Looking back at her literary foremothers both in the East and the West, Hahn seeks to follow the footsteps of women who endeavoured to tear the male Eurocentric language and canon apart, and bring the so-called illicit desires of the coloured woman, who is often orientalist and stereotyped in Western representation, into mainstream discourse. Luce Irigaray, in “The Sex Which Is Not One”, notes that the masculinist language system invariably reduces the woman to the passivity of an object. If she attempts to articulate herself, her words become incomprehensible to the male interlocutors and seem “somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason” (29). Like Cixous, Irigaray also perceives a woman’s agential entry into language as an expression of her erotogeneity; her genitals, that had hitherto been reduced to a nullity by masculinist discourses, find assertion in feminine modes of articulation. In this respect, an interesting aspect of the text is its “thematic redundancy” (Hahn 5), which, Hahn says, a cisgender man is incapable of understanding because the experiences recorded are predominantly feminine and often regarded as meaningless and obscene. A particular section in this anthology is entitled “*Yan*” (Hahn 8), a character from the Chinese script which means ‘speech’. Robert Grotjohn makes an observation that the character for *Yan* (言) is comprised of two parts of which the box-like suffix is the radical for ‘mouth’ and the series of lines above it is an abbreviation of the character for ‘crime’. Hence, *Yan* indicates a crime of the mouth (Grotjohn 222-223). Thus, the title of this section signifies how Hahn’s words can be read as indecorous and unseemly, an unthinkable trespass against decorous male subject matter.

3. Analysis of Selected Poems from *Mosquito and Ant*

Mosquito and Ant (1999) begins with the poem, “The Razor”, which expresses a daughter’s lament for her mother’s death. As the funeral rites come to pass, she becomes increasingly aware of the finality of the cremation and looks for tokens to remind herself of her mother. In this anguished search, the father is accorded only a peripheral

3 See Littlejohn, Lauren J. “Confucianism: How Analects Promoted Patriarchy and Influenced the Subordination of Women in East Asia.” *Young Historians Conference* 9, Portland State University, 2017. <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1120&context=younghistorians>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2023.

4 Cleary notes that the Holy Mother of Dongling, a woman of the 4th century C.E., had to put up with the anger of her husband that stemmed from his suspicion toward her devotion to and practice of Taoism. Her husband had gone to the extent of denouncing her and having put her in jail. At the jail, she is said to have mastered the art of disappearing and flew out of the window (Cleary xx-xxi).

space because he “did not know / [she] needed the handkerchief / mother had pressed a week earlier” (Hahn 7). Such is the immensity of the loss experienced by the daughter that even something as trivial as a handkerchief becomes a necessity, emphasized by the verb “need”. This emotion seems to be beyond the father, who clearly did not inhabit the intimate mother-daughter space. The speaker recalls with bitterness, in “Sewing With Mother”, the way in which her father had been arrogant towards her mother, whom he dismissed, ridiculed and silenced. Moreover, the fact that the father tries to exercise a similar control on the speaker by correcting her with cooking tips makes it clear that he could never bond with his daughter the same way her mother had (Hahn 75). This makes her desire to seek her mother all the more intense because she recognizes that the grief she is experiencing is unfathomable to her father. She realises that only a maternal figure could begin to understand the importance of her needs while the paternal figure would dismiss them as moments of weakness. The poem acts as a foreword to the sections to follow.

The mother’s death, especially her ashes, reminds the middle-aged poet of the transience of her own aging body and the striking lack of sensuality in her life. The rest of the book bears an underlying motif of *mono no aware*⁵ as she searches for stimulation to rejuvenate herself. Xiaojing Zhou states:

For Hahn, using words innovatively to express women’s sensibility and sexuality which challenges the patriarchal system that represses women’s desire, and reduces women’s otherness to inferior attributes that justify their subordination to men in a hierarchical binary, is artistically and politically necessary. (135-136)

As a married woman with children, Hahn’s speaker is alienated from herself. Her husband’s indifference perpetuates her dissatisfaction with her married life, where she becomes the only one in the relationship to attempt to revive the passion. To this, she is met with an ambiguous response from her husband (Hahn 12). In “Becoming the Mother”, the speaker ruminates over how subtly her husband’s tenderness towards her had faded away as she says:

When had he become that mother
 who had left her so alone
 when the baby cried?
 When had his heart become that heart
 withdrawing from the whorls of her offerings? (Hahn 69)

The speaker has to invest her time in tending to her daughters’ needs and balance her work-life with her role as a wife. Moreover, the expectations that come from the socially recognized institutions of marriage and motherhood make it so that she has to abandon her sexual life in the interest of her identity as a responsible mother. In an attempt to find a way to express her desires and complaints without any inhibition, the speaker starts off a chain of correspondences with a female individual whom she calls L. It is remarkable that in the lack of companionship from her husband, she chooses to correspond with a woman as she is aware that women recognize each other’s experiences and are more capable of empathizing with them than are men who embody the privi-

5 *Mono no aware* is a Japanese idiom to indicate an awareness or sensitivity to the impermanence of things. It carries a sense of wistfulness that comes with the perception of the ephemeral nature of life. Throughout her poems and *zuihitsu*, Hahn ruminates over the ephemeral nature of youth, vigour, passion, and the presence of the people in her life.

leges afforded by a patriarchal system.

Although her full name is never revealed, L is referred to as an older sister by the speaker. It may be inferred that L is an initial for the word *laotong*, which signifies that she is the speaker's *laotong* or sworn sister with whom she can share her deepest, most intimate thoughts. Making use of the confessional mode, the speaker's private desires and anxieties become an indictment of publicly sanctioned discourses around women's self and sexuality. In "Wax", Hahn's speaker voices her anxieties regarding her aging body for the first time. She asks L for advice on "how to stay a woman" (Hahn 9), realizing that her youthful body, which she once hated, was actually lithe and beautiful. She goes on to mention in the poem "Kafka's Erection" that motherhood and age have deprived her of control over her own body. She says:

With two children my own longing often
feels alien –
the breast for nursing, the genitals
for birth (forget conception –). (Hahn 15)

The patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood impose strictures upon the body of the mother, expecting it to relinquish sexuality and embrace a self-effacing non-identity circumscribed within the role of motherhood. In the *zuihitsu*, "Morning Light", she talks about how her husband only returns to her "for their daughters" (Hahn 11). Her increasing alienation from her husband adds to her sense of dysphoria as she no longer sees herself or her body as sexually desirable, though she tries to hold on to her self-confidence in front of her young daughters.

In the eponymous poem of this collection, Hahn's speaker brings back the allusion to the immortal sisters. The female adepts had established themselves against the highly patriarchal directives of imperial China and were regarded as learned mystics. Here, the speaker accords women like her, who struggle to make their presence felt in the face of patriarchal repression, the same status. Her "fingertips tingle / as if catching breath" as she reads about the adepts who were considered to be "travellers / from another dimension" and they empower her to write and voice out her desires (Hahn 23). This reminds one of how Cixous talks of the act of writing as not only liberating for women's self and sexuality, but also a mode to destabilize the "superegoized structure" that coerces them into feeling guilty (Cixous 880). That is why the speaker writes through the hurdles of motherhood, exchanging letters across the "frozen continent" (Hahn 10). The term, occurring in the poem, "Wax", is a representation of her body as cold from the absence of the warmth of youthful passion. However, in the next lines, she also mentions "steam rising off rivers" (Hahn 10), implying that the articulation of her desire is gradually initiating the process of the thawing of her frigidity. It is clear that she finds a space to voice out her desire—and, as a result, to acknowledge and express it—in her correspondence with L. Language, for her, becomes akin to sexual expression, which is much in line with Cixous's assertion that the practice of writing is "a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity" (Cixous 876).

In "Jam", the speaker reflects on something L had said to her in one of the initial exchanges. She says:

... I miss my self.
Dear L, you tell me I count on him

to retrieve my own body. (Hahn 23)

This revelation puts her in a state of contemplation as she rehearses her husband's indifference towards her self. His dismissive treatment of her makes her feel isolated. In the concept of a companionate marriage, which young girls grow up with through fairy tales and folklore⁶, there exists the idea that a woman needs a man to complete herself. This, in turn, makes women dependent on the man to experience sexual pleasure as masturbation or self-exploration become illicit practices that do not orient into the socially accepted goal of self-perpetuation⁷. The speaker begins to fantasize about youthful romantic adventures as an alternative to her stagnant married life. In a playful manner, the speaker introduces the figure of X in the poem, "The Tumbler", as a clandestine lover of hers. It is ambiguous whether X is, in fact, a real individual. Certain indications in the text reveal that he is a generic construct in the mind of the speaker. Firstly, the use of the mathematical expression X implies that the identity of the person is a mystery and he could potentially be anyone. Secondly, in the poem, "Radiator", she mentions that X is more of her heart than her heart which may be understood as an instance of word play: the expression is a common hyperbolic utterance of adoration but in the case of the speaker, her heart is also her heart's desire or the kind of person she would want her lover to be. Hence, X may be more of an idealized expression of the qualities she desires in a potential lover. However, L encourages the speaker to employ the "specificity of John" (Hahn 26) instead of a generic pronoun, which marks X with a more concrete identity. Nevertheless, the name is also so common that it is rendered unindividual (Grotjohn 226).

The next section, entitled *Nu*, or 'woman', delves into how the figure of the woman in history is othered and demonized. This section becomes especially important since Hahn comments not only on the construction of the woman through the male gaze, but also the gaze of the white Orientalist that distorts the coloured, Asian-American woman. In discussing the implication of the idea of translation in Hahn's works, Xiwen Mai highlights the poet's critical attitude towards Western translations of Lady Murasaki's *Genji Monogatari*⁸, which do not accord sufficient importance to Japanese history and culture and often read the text as a reinforcement of patriarchal practices. She cites the translation of *Genji* by Arthur Waley, who had never been to Asia despite being a renowned translator of classical Chinese and Japanese texts. It points to how translation is an act often imbued with personal ideologies and inclinations which produce variations in the interpretation of a particular text⁹. Hahn's early works comment on the male Eurocentric perspective of women's works that distorts their politics, ignoring the female agency inherent in women's use of the literary language, the *kana*. Thus, in poems like "The Akashi Woman Speaks Above a Whisper" and "Lady Rokujo Hails A Taxi", the speaker focuses her attention on the sensibilities of the female characters in *Genji Monogatari*, such as Lady Rokujo and Lady Akashi, who have

6 Stories including stock characters like the Damsel-in-Distress and the Prince Charming who delivers her from suffering, and ending with a grand wedding often instill the desire to look for and depend on an idealistic conception of heterosexual companionship in young women. The traditional accounts of Cinderella and Snow White come to mind.

7 Gayle Rubin traces how the act of masturbation has been pathologized and negated through history. She observes that it is seen as an inferior substitute to partnered sex. See "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, edited by Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, Routledge Publications, 2006, pp. 143-178.

8 *Genji Monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji*, is an early 11th century text composed by the noblewoman, Lady Murasaki Shikibu. It is often deemed to be one of the earliest prose works in history. It narrates the tale of its eponymous hero and his amorous adventures, and faithfully records the depiction of courtly life in Heian Japan.

9 See Mai, Xiwen. "'Continental Drift': Translation and Kimiko Hahn's Transcultural Poetry." *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol 4, no. 1, 2012, pp. 4-9. doi:10.5070/T841012828. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

been appropriated and constructed by male translators.

In the poem, “Translating Ancient Lines into Vernacular”, Hahn’s speaker comments on the sincerity required to translate women’s works. She believes that a man cannot fully grasp women’s experiences, let alone translate them. She wants to go to where “the hysteric resides” (Hahn 29), the very moment of inspiration when the work was conceived in the mind of the author. The image of the spinning child reminds one of shamanic madness, the moment of divine inspiration. Throughout history, women operating outside normative precepts have been labelled hysterics. Hahn seems to reclaim the label and uses it to empower the female author/translator with a sense of mystical awareness. The very act of writing “the coy lines” (Hahn 45) becomes a gesture of protest. These dissenting endeavours of the women are read reductively. In the *zuihitsu*, “The Downpour”, the speaker obsessively reminds herself how history attempts to efface women by leaving out information regarding their identities and manipulating their life trajectories to fit their stories into a convenient patriarchal narrative. Here, she repeats over and over again how there is no record of Sei Shonagon’s given name, though historical surmise suggests it may be Nagiko. However, the lack of objective evidence bothers her. The *zuihitsu* becomes an agonized search for the Heian author’s name, almost similar to the search for her mother in the inaugural poem, “The Razor”. Just as she tries to preserve the tokens associated with her deceased mother, she is anxious to preserve and rehearse the identities of her literary foremothers in an attempt to define her own self better.

It is only through the assistance of other women, in this homosocial sphere premised on maternal genealogies she has carved out for herself, that she ultimately finds some fulfillment. In an interesting passage, she exposes the appropriation of women’s history by male Buddhist monks. She writes:

As with the daring poet, Ono no Komachi, Sei Shonagon was reputed to experience a downfall: dying in squalor, unloved and desolate. Such a rendition is most likely a revision of her life by over-enthusiastic Buddhists, eager for female repentance. (Hahn 37)

Moreover, in the poem, “Garnet”, she speaks of Empress Wu Tsu-T’ien who had begun as a concubine to Emperor T’ai, and then his son, Emperor Kai, later replacing him as the monarch of China. Recent research into imperial history has unearthed a great deal of distortion in the archives. Prejudiced male historians have conveniently focused on her promiscuity as her only memorable trait, setting her up as a bad example, ignoring her might as a ruler (Dash). The speaker, however, plays on the deliberate insistence on the Empress’ sexuality, reading her actions as an expression of agency. Her ambition and self-advanced mobility, despite her social status, sets a good example for other women, proving that spaces of dissidence and subversion do exist. To quote Cixous in this context, “[h]er libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think” (Cixous 882). This section also consolidates the importance of women’s solidarity.

The speaker constantly returns to matrilineal literary history in her conversations with L; she discusses a distinct, almost orgasmic enthusiasm she feels when she meets other women. In poems like “Orchid Root” and “Croissant”, Grotjohn observes a “lesbian suggestiveness” between women in Hahn’s poems, which becomes crucial in their articulation of desire. Sworn sisters fall in love with each other’s poems and, in fact, with each other in the process of correspondence—as do the speaker and her daughters on observing a female photographer at work. In this way, the man who has been constructed within hetero-patriarchal discourses as the woman’s love interest is replaced by another woman, thus prioritizing female bonds over heterosexual romance (Grotjohn 228-

229). Adrienne Rich had coined the term “lesbian continuum” (Rich 27) to describe a range of woman-identified experiences, which includes non-consummated bonds between women who share an inner affinity with each other. The relationship between L and the speaker, evidently stronger than her relationship with any man, falls into this continuum as they both share “profoundly female experience[s]” (Rich 28). Rich also states that eroticism in women’s terms is not limited to the genitals but may be omnipresent throughout her entire being. Thus, the consummation may be physical, emotional or psychic, and in turn, uplifting. For Hahn’s speaker, it is just so, as the advice she receives from L helps her decentre herself from the patriarchal epicentre of wifehood, bringing her closer to her own self.

In the last few lines of “The Lunar Calendar”, against the old prohibitive directive, the speaker masturbates and gives herself the “stunningly adequate” (Hahn 54) orgasm and sensual satisfaction she had been expecting from her husband and X. This shows her that she, in fact, is not incomplete without a lover and is herself in possession of her sexual agency. It is important to note that the speaker could only find pleasure at last through her deeply intimate correspondence with L, who, like a guide, advised her well. In this light, it is fascinating to call attention to the poem called “Chuang Tzu’s Mistress Sleeps in a Draft”, where Hahn reconstructs the butterfly dream¹⁰ from a woman’s perspective. In the dream, her consciousness is distinct from that of the moth. She saves it by warming it inside her mouth. The moth is a less privileged insect compared to its counterpart, the butterfly, and the mistress, being the less privileged counterpart of her male master, identifies with it. The act of warming the insect inside her body establishes a special bond between the two, depicting female togetherness. One may even read the relationship between L and the speaker in the characters of the mistress and the moth, who assist each other in times of distress.

Hahn’s speaker’s celebration of the beauty of women’s togetherness always returns to the memories of her mother. Even as time lapses, she searches for her and regretfully laments for “the narrative” (Hahn 51) of patriarchy had exiled her long before her demise. It is only after a significant while that the speaker realizes the ideological limitations that kept mother and daughter apart. As a mother herself now, she tries her best to understand the idiosyncrasies of her teenage daughters. She herself deals with a midlife identity crisis, grieves for her mother and tries to come to terms with the still-prevalent injustices against women.

In the concluding section, titled *Xin* or ‘heart’, she ponders on becoming a mother in ways outside the essential idea of becoming so through conception and birth. Motherhood, too, becomes a continuum that embodies diverse experiences. For Hahn’s speaker, motherhood is an alienating experience that disconnects her from her husband and, in a way, children. She struggles to connect with her daughters as she realizes, through her own mother’s death, that the mother-daughter experience is the nucleus of all female bonds. The ending *zuihitsu*, “Sewing Without Mother”, expresses her frustration at the treatment meted out to women under patriarchal social structures. Nevertheless, at the end, she tries to visualise her family through a primary matrilineage marked by the overwhelming presence of her mother in her life, and now, her presence in her two daughters’ lives. The book ends with *Yu*, the Chinese character for rain. The word is phonetically similar to the English pronoun ‘you’, which one may read as the speaker’s final assertion of the individual identity of the female subject. The preceding two pieces, “Becoming the Mother” and “Sewing without Mother”, mirror the identities of the speaker and her mother, where the demarcation between I and You seems to be blurred as the speaker herself encounters the experiences of a mother and embodies them, in some ways.

4. Conclusion

Kimiko Hahn's *Mosquito and Ant* (1999), therefore, inscribes her identity as an Asian-American woman through a mode of articulation that bears both her Eastern and Western heritage. In her self-fulfilment through the act of writing, she becomes a part of Medusa's joy. As this paper attempts to delineate, she remarkably celebrates East Asian women's literary practices and puts them in conversation with the French feminists associated with *écriture féminine*. She uses the very language that objectifies her, mistranslates Eastern women's narratives and reduces the feminine to a passive lump, to speak back to patriarchy. Hahn also calls for initiative on the part of diasporic women to give expression to her cultural heritage and enshrine their transcultural identity by incorporating the all-pervasive English language, a common language of exchange in a globalized world, with their indigenous literary forms. Moreover, Hahn emphasizes on the empowering nature of female intimacy through her relationship to and correspondence with L. It is L's companionship that helps her cope with the grief over her mother's death and the frustration she experiences in her marriage. In a culture that has historically pitted women against each other, Kimiko Hahn's collection of poems and *zuihitsu* argues for and upholds the bond between women.

10 Chuang Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, had dreamt one night that he was a butterfly. In the dream, he flew from one flower to the other and felt free. In the dream, he had been sure of his identity as a butterfly, but upon waking up, he realized that it was all but a dream, and that he was Chuang Tzu, a human being. However, he found himself asking whether he was Chuang Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu, questioning his subjectivity in the process.

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The Paralysis of Freedom in *Crime and Punishment* and *War and Peace*

Mauli Kaushik

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the split between the thinkers and doers of nineteenth-century Russian realist literature through a comparative reading of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The characters chosen for this analysis are Raskolnikov from the former and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov from the latter, who struggle to reconcile the perceived split between thought and action both within and external to themselves. At the authorial level, the three men are treated as canvases for an exploration of attitudes to freedom, selfhood, and salvation, influenced by and responding to contemporary social-political discourses of the time. The schismatic nature of their inner lives, however, often encroaches upon such philosophical discussion to reshape itself, and the paper shall explore the manner in which the authors negotiate with such an encroachment.

Keywords: Wanderer, ideology, Raskolnikov, Bolkonsky, Bezukhov.

1. Introduction: The Wanderer

“These homeless Russian wanderers are wandering still, and the time will be long before they disappear...” (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech”).

Raskolnikov, the impecunious student, Pierre, the naïvely amiable heir to fortune and high society, and Prince Andrei, the coldly aristocratic militiaman — all three are men who differ drastically from one another in terms of class, occupation, and character, yet collectively personify the type which Dostoevsky famously dubbed “the unhappy wanderer in his native land, the Russian sufferer of history” (Dostoevsky, “Pushkin Speech”). The motif of the restless dreamer, so common in the 19th-century Russian novel,¹ is developed distinctly in each of these characters, and serves as the persona upon which Dostoevsky and Tolstoy map out their ideological negotiations with subjection and agency. The unmooring of the self, implied by the epithet “wanderer”, is key to an understanding of their predicament. Andrei, Pierre, and Raskolnikov are not unique in terms of the questions with which they are faced. Some include: How can a benign God permit such arbitrary suffering? What forces propel the movement of history? What is the way forward for Russian society? Such questions dominated the intellectual and political landscape of their periods.² What sets them apart as wanderers is their inability to retreat from such questions, even temporarily, without profoundly lacerating their sense of self.

For an Ilya Petrovich or a Boris Drubetskoy, anchoring their personhood in personal advancement can sidestep such questions without compromising the integrity of their self.³ The wanderer, however, has no stable self, outside of existential questioning to which he can retreat. His sense of identity is bound up almost entirely

1 See Lukács, György. “Dostoevsky.” *Russian Realism in World Literature*, translated by Rene Wellek, Berlin, 1953.

2 For a detailed discussion, see Offord, Derek. “Crime and Punishment and Contemporary Radical Thought.” *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: A Casebook*, edited by Richard Peace, Oxford University Press, 2006.

he abandon his dreaming without inflicting the gravest violence upon the very cornerstone of his identity?

This entwining of selfhood with idealism gives a peculiar urgency to the various experimentations with the manner in which he engages in these grand ideological battles; should he cease, even momentarily, to torment himself with philosophical conundrums, he would be threatened with implosion. This is a character who has been “an abstract person, a restless dreamer, all his life long” (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech”); how can ideology that these characters perform within the text. These men are not toying with ideology to construct their view of the world; they are doing it to construct their view of themselves. The mercurial passion with which they throw themselves into these new enthusiasms, the desperation with which they cling to their pet theory of the moment, and the soul-destroying process of disillusionment with the idea, all spring from this central fact. A Pierre turning to Freemasonry is not as lightly bound to his new obsession as a Luzhin is to utilitarian ideals; he must give himself over, body and soul, to the rituals of the Freemasons, and undergo a spiritually exhausting transformation of his entire personality in the process.⁴ Similarly, witness Andrei upon undergoing a shift from cynicism to action: “He did not even understand now how he could ever have doubted the necessity of taking an active part in life, just as a month earlier he had not understood how it could ever “occur to him to leave the country” (Tolstoy 601). He cannot recognise his previous self without feeling alienated from it because, in a sense, it is wholly alien to him; in embracing a new ideology, he has constructed his selfhood anew. Raskolnikov’s complete identification with his idea is, of course, the driving force of *Crime and Punishment*.

This temperamental predisposition is complicated by the social situation each character occupies. Despite being poles apart in terms of class, they are similar in their complete isolation from humanity. Pierre, the illegitimate-son-turned-heir of Count Bezukhov, finds himself continually on shifting social ground as he navigates his unexpected inheritance, marriage to and separation from the socialite Princess Kuragina, and friendship with the Rostov family. Andrei, caught between a fractious father, a sister whose religious pursuits have no sympathy with his own, and a wife whose social successes provoke in him only contempt, likewise has no foundation of community upon which to base his sense of self. In Raskolnikov’s case, the isolation is literally (Dostoevsky 45), is described by his mother as a “coffin” (270).

In Dostoevsky’s view, the isolation which exacerbates the wanderer’s sense of rootlessness is a direct result of living in “an intellectual society, uprooted from among the people” (“Pushkin Speech”). The temperament of the wanderer may be, “an eternal type, long since settled in our Russian land”, but the violent expression it finds in Pierre or Raskolnikov is a more recent phenomenon (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech”). This particular manifestation of the eternal type was born “after Peter’s great reforms” (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech”)— the alienation

3 Each appearance of Drubetskoy in the text is accompanied by a faithful chronicle of his efforts to rise through the ranks: “He made friends and sought acquaintances only with people who were above him and therefore could be of use to him” (Tolstoy 901). Similarly, Ilya Petrovich, the “Powder Keg”, is exclusively described in terms of personal ambition as a man who “failed to express anything much other than a certain insolence” (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 138).

4 Luzhin on his professed ideals: “he couldn’t care less about all the doctrines, philosophies and systems which Andrei Semyonovich was in such a hurry to share with him. He had his own goal in mind. The only thing that mattered to him was to find out right away: ...Were these people in the ascendant or were they not? Did he himself have anything to fear or did he not?” (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 403). This is a clear contrast with the bumbling but earnest naïveté of Pierre: “Hoping to enter a totally new life, totally different from his former one, he expected everything to be extraordinary... ‘God, death, love, the brotherhood of men,’ he said to himself, connecting vague but joyful notions of something with these words” (Tolstoy 487).

from the self he experiences at an individual level is echoed and amplified in the alienation of Russian society from its roots. “In the heart of his mother country, he is of course an exile in a foreign land,” says Dostoevsky of this cerebral creature, for “...he has forgotten how to work, he has no culture” (“Pushkin Speech”). This diagnosis of the wanderer’s anomie, provided by Dostoevsky and shared to a large extent by Tolstoy, is fundamental to the cure they prescribe for their heroes — “Humble yourself, proud man, and first of all break down your pride. Humble yourself, idle man, and first of all labour on your native land” (“Pushkin Speech”)— and the protracted suffering each of them undergoes prior to resurrection into a healthy, useful, and distinctively Russian way of life. The counterpoint to these characters’ existential angst is thus a narrative of peasant simplicity, orthodox religiosity, fatalism, and physical labour, constructed by the authors as a national myth into which the excessively Europeanised intellectual of a post-reform Russia⁵ must be inducted.

The resurrection is intimately bound up with a love of humanity which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky elevate to divinity, and mark as emblematic of the true Russian character. Raskolnikov’s moment of epiphany comes through love of Sofya Semyonovna, the aptly named purveyor of divine wisdom — “Love had resurrected them, and the heart of each contained inexhaustible springs of life for the heart of the other” (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 584). Platon Karataev, who fulfils this role for Pierre, speaks with the cadence of “old Russian women” and remains to Pierre “the embodiment of everything Russian”, for “he loved and lived lovingly with everything that life brought his way” (Tolstoy 1337-42). The process of suffering, having annihilated the ego of the wanderer, leaves him free to accept the baptism of love into the idealised Russian way of life. However, as this paper will demonstrate, the sensibility of the polemicist regularly gives way to that of the realist in the writings of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The result is a complex negotiation with questions of selfhood and free will, dictated as much by the characters’ interiority as it is by the authors’ ideological convictions. Even as they advocate for a leap of faith and a whole-hearted return to the bosom of the motherland, the literary habits of self-reflection do not desert either writer or character, complicating their ostensible ideological surrender to religious or historical determinism.

2. “Sicklied O’er by the Pale Cast of Thought”⁶

“But I’m talking too much. That’s why I never do anything. Or maybe it’s because I never do anything that I’m always talking” (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 46)

This, Raskolnikov’s wry self-reflection within minutes of his first appearance in the novel, is in many ways the root of the matter for all three characters. This is the reason why they cannot be reduced to caricatures of the intellectual or resurrected into caricatures of the peasant; they are too vividly self-aware to be flattened so. The schism between thought and action which is such a hallmark of their characters also arises from this intense self-scrutiny, and each of the stages of their character development can be plotted out in relation to it. The pattern of their progression can be roughly described as follows — a period of anguished existential questioning is followed by the rapturous avowal of a given philosophy, typically one which promises absolute certainty, before disillusionment sets in and the process begins anew. Each phase is continually punctured by a guilty awareness of precisely what they are doing — trying frantically to stifle the pain of questioning by adopting the first viable ideology they can find — and the intrusion of this uncomfortably honest self-observation is greeted with anger

5 The 1696 reforms conducted by Tsar Peter I (“Peter the Great”).

6 Hamlet 3.1.87

and self-loathing. The man becomes at once spy and criminal within his own consciousness, as he tries and fails to manufacture that singleness of purpose he desires; “he no sooner lays hold of his truth than he catches himself in a state of mind that belies it” (Rahv 393).

In this paradigm, the novel itself functions as a changing-room in which the character tentatively tries on and discards various ideologies to find one that fits, with each stage being accompanied by a fresh wave of desperation.⁷ He has no tolerance for half-truths, “the Russian wanderer can find his own peace only in the happiness of all men; he will not be more cheaply satisfied” (“Pushkin Speech”). This desire for a single unifying belief system, is fundamentally incompatible with the fragmented nature of the wanderer’s consciousness. Since his selfhood has been predicated entirely on his theory, he will never be cheaply satisfied in himself either; his motto is *aut caesar aut nihil*⁸ throughout. Richard Peace’s observation on Raskolnikov’s interiority would hold just as true for Andrei or Pierre: “The coin of Raskolnikov’s inner realm, bearing on one side the head of Napoleon, on the other the effigy of a louse, spins in a constant game of ‘heads and tails’ with his surroundings” (Peace 78). With the enthusiasm for the new idea comes the typical wanderer’s desire to be its most perfect representation, a living embodiment of it, rising above its wavering practitioners and bringing it to the heathen⁹ to illuminate their lives. An overview of such a character’s trajectory over the course of the novel is helpful in visualising certain key motifs which dictate this behaviour. While Raskolnikov is presented in a brief and hectic phase of complete devotion to a singular idea, the observation of Andrei and Pierre spans decades, allowing them to complete several such cycles. It is with them, therefore, that this analysis will be most clearly conducted.

The opening note is struck in this description of Pierre’s mental state:

Whatever he started thinking about, he came back to the same questions, which he could not resolve and could not stop asking himself. It was as if the main screw in his head, which held his whole life together, had become stripped. The screw would not go in, would not come out, but turned in the same groove without catching hold, and it was impossible to stop turning it. (Tolstoy 499)

Note that the “screw” of ideology is seen as holding his whole life together — in effect, living and philosophising are seen not as concurrent processes, but as consequent ones. It is impossible to live without first having definitively decided upon an ideology to live by. Meaning, or truth, is “as it were somewhere outside himself” (Dostoevsky “Pushkin Speech”), discoverable in isolation rather than constructed in the process of living. To live without ideology would be to admit that one had failed in discovering it and live as a failure — a state of existence which, though grim, would have at least the consolation of deliverance from continually having to strive for perfection.

Although Pierre and Raskolnikov continually flirt with the terrifying yet comforting idea of being a louse, neither experiences the complete breakdown of the ego in this particular manner; their tendency is more frequently expressed in terms of delusions of grandeur. Andrei is the only one of the three who undergoes a sustained period of this prior to his resurrection, and a brief discussion of his experience is fruitful in identifying the motivations

7 See also Lukács, “Dostoevsky.” 1953, for a discussion of the provisional nature of the wanderer’s existence.

8 Loosely translated to “All or nothing” or “Either emperor or nothing.”

9 Pierre’s raptures on being inducted into the Masonic brotherhood are typical: “He pictured people such as he himself had been two weeks ago, and he mentally addressed to them a didactic and admonitory speech. He pictured depraved and unfortunate people whom he helped in word and deed; he pictured oppressors whose victims he saved” (Tolstoy 489).

motivations and pitfalls of this particular escape route. Andrei's retreat into cynicism is simply a more honest restatement of the wanderer's quest — deliverance from the torment of continual doubt and perfectionist self-castigation. Having tried and failed to submerge his relentlessly questioning self within a larger ideology, he chooses to recognise his predicament for what it is and seek refuge in its very hopelessness:

[H]e again thought over his whole life and reached the same old *comforting and hopeless* conclusion, that there was no need for him to start anything, that he had to live out his life without doing evil, without anxiety, and without wishing for anything. (Tolstoy 597; emphasis added)

Meaninglessness is itself elevated to a system of meaning in this extreme response. The formulation is a surprisingly modern¹⁰ one — if meaning does not exist, to admit meaninglessness as a philosophy of life is no defeat or humiliation, but a badge of courage. This also frees the wanderer from the acute torture of chafing at his own inaction while the philosophical problem is cerebrally worked out. Instead, making one's presence in the world as unobtrusive as possible is counted as a twofold benefit — it does not interfere unnecessarily with a predestined course of events, and it spares one the fever and the fret of trying:

“I'm alive and it's not my fault, which means I must somehow go on living the best I can, without bothering anybody, until I die.”

“But what makes you live? With such thoughts, you'll sit without moving, without undertaking anything...”

“Life won't leave one alone as it is. I'd be glad to do nothing.” (Tolstoy 548)

Why, then, is this eminently rational and convenient position abandoned? In Tolstoy's paradigm, its very rationality and convenience tell against it. If “man observes himself through reason, but he knows himself through consciousness” (Tolstoy 1650), the intellectual working out of this problem must be discarded as fallacious, even if it appears satisfactory. The focus is trained instead upon the vaguer promptings of the inner consciousness, which, being fragmented, can never be satisfied with a single unified solution (even if the solution is that there can be no unity). Descriptions of Andrei's ostensibly calm despair are thus continually disrupted with a dimly articulated unease:

[T]he conditions of life in which he had been happy became a burden for him, and still more of a burden were the freedom and independence that had once been so dear to him...He not only did not think those former thoughts...but he was even afraid to remember those thoughts that had opened boundless and bright horizons...As if that boundless, ever receding vault of the sky that used to stand over him had suddenly turned into a low, definite, oppressive vault, in which everything was clear and nothing was eternal or mysterious. (Tolstoy 880)

The strain of escaping from ennui has, in a sense, been replaced by the strain of maintaining it. Even deliberate and total self-destruction cannot succeed in eliminating those vestiges of the self which remain to torment him with indecision. Being, as it were, “trapped in his own endlessly rationalising consciousness” (Nuttall 9), Andrei finds that the trap still has chinks through which the disturbingly amorphous inner self can creep in.

10 See Camus on Absurdity in “The Myth of Sisyphus”.

Therefore, instead of manufacturing the total inner hopelessness required for such a worldview, Pierre and Raskolnikov project outwards, trying to find an anchor outside themselves. Pierre's motivation for taking up Freemasonry is typical, "It was so joyful for him now to be delivered of his arbitrariness and submit his will to a person or persons who knew the unquestionable truth" (Tolstoy 514). However, the description of his induction into the brotherhood is a series of failures to manufacture this single-mindedness within himself:

He experienced the unfortunate ability of many people, especially Russians—the ability to see and believe in the possibility of goodness and truth, and to see the evil and falsehood of life too clearly to be able to participate in it seriously. (Tolstoy 759)

This reflective tendency continually disrupts his avowed ideological position, creating an uncanny effect of disorientation, for those around him, as well as himself. The very breadth of his philosophical reasoning becomes his undoing, for the moment an idea is intellectually accepted, it is opened up, even against his will, to intellectual enquiry — and then the vastness of the idea itself acts as a direct paralysis to action. A pattern is soon established; the more rapturously Pierre extols an idea or resolves upon a course of action, the more unlikely it is that he will actually carry it out. The text is replete with such examples; one will suffice:

At once he remembered the word of honour he had given Prince Andrei not to visit Kuragin... the thought occurred to him that the word he had given meant nothing, because before giving his word to Prince Andrei, he had also given Prince Anatole his word that he would be there; finally he thought that all these words of honour were mere conventions, with no definite meaning, especially if you considered that you might die the next day, or something so extraordinary might happen to you that there would no longer be either honour or dishonour. That sort of reasoning often came to Pierre, destroying all his decisions and suppositions. (Tolstoy 63)

Similarly, the beauty of Raskolnikov's theory¹¹ lies in its grandeur — the division of humanity into two classes solves and unifies, at a single stroke, questions of morality, the movement of history, the role of providence, the social construction of criminality — and the terror of it lies there too. To retreat from it is impossible; that would be to abandon oneself. To act upon it is equally impossible; its ramifications are so vast that the failure of a part would be a failure of the whole, and besides, it is too overwhelming to contemplate. Perhaps mulling it over repeatedly would soften it, reduce it to a manageable size, make it more commensurate with the limits of individual understanding. On the contrary, the more he thinks it over, the more its complications multiply and the more it seems at once preposterous and self-evidently true, for he can find neither the means to justify nor refute it:

Let us note, by the way, one peculiarity of all the definitive decisions already taken by him in this venture. They shared one strange quality: the more definitive they were, the more hideous and absurd they immediately became in his own eyes...And even if he should have reached the point some day, somehow, when everything had been analysed, down to the very last detail, and everything had been resolved, and not a

11 Following from the realisation that all true pioneers are necessarily in revolt against the morals of their society, Raskolnikov divides humanity into two: "the first category, i.e., the base material, is made up, generally speaking, of people who are conservative and deferential by nature...they are simply obliged to be obedient, because that is their purpose...In the second category, everyone oversteps the law...The first category is always master of the present, the second – master of the future. The first preserves the world and multiplies; the second moves the world and leads it towards a goal" (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 300-301).

single doubt remained – well then, it seemed, he would have rejected it all as an absurdity, a monstrosity, an impossibility. (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 112)

In sum, the devotion of serious thought to any action is a guarantee of its failure, for “the acting man can be efficient and self-assured only insofar as his consciousness is non-reflective...Raskolnikov, however, is above all a man of reflection” (Rahv 19).

It is precisely this incompatibility that draws them irresistibly to any person or idea that is utterly self-assured. It is telling that it is not the actual ideology which is the point of seduction, but the certainty that it brings, allowing critic Philip Rahv to acutely observe that, “Raskolnikov stands in an inauthentic relation to his crime... The crime does not truly belong to him, and that is the reason he affects us as being almost ludicrously inadequate to his deed.” It is no accident that the fields of the military, religion, and utilitarianism which the three are drawn to all depend upon clearly defined roles and relations which are incontestable. Still more significant is the role of Napoleon in their imaginations. Lukács accurately diagnoses their relationship to this figure when he comments, “The fascinating figure of Napoleon set an example less by his ultimate aims than by his method, by the kinds and techniques of his action, by his way of overcoming obstacles...the concrete action becomes fortuitous — an occasion rather than a real aim or means” (Lukács 148). Andrei practically admits as much in this telling encounter with Speransky:

In general, the main feature that struck Prince Andrei in Speransky’s mind was his unquestionable, unshakeable faith in the power and legitimacy of reason. It was clear that the notion, so usual for Prince Andrei, that it was after all impossible to express everything one thinks, would never have entered Speransky’s head, and it never occurred to him to wonder: “Isn’t everything I think and believe sheer nonsense?” And that special cast of Speransky’s mind attracted Prince Andrei most of all. (Tolstoy 613)

Tellingly, even though Andrei’s ideological and personal regard for Kutuzov’s military strategy is far greater, Kutuzov never inspires such adulation in him. Andrei has already, by this time, accepted the wisdom of Kutuzov’s impatience with military strategising and determinism, but Speransky’s complete self-assurance in his ability to change the course of history still holds for him an irresistible charm.

This nature of their Napoleonic longings¹² lays the ground for the corollary to their thought without action— impulsive action which, most often, takes the actor completely by surprise. Repeatedly, these characters commit actions by impulse which they themselves are later at a loss to account for, as though the body were rebelling against an atrophy imposed by the brain. Accordingly, their actions are often in direct contradiction to their, such as Raskolnikov’s attempt to protect the drunk girl on the street, which runs counter to his logic of percentages. Such moments in the text can be read as brief fulfilments of the desire to become the non-reflective man of action which the Napoleonic figure represents. More sustained efforts to achieve Napoleonic status result in uncanny sequences such as Raskolnikov’s test visit to Alyona Ivanovna’s or Pierre’s quest to assassinate Napoleon. The feeling of being swept along by an irresistible force creates a sense of disorientation, confounding reality and nightmare:

12 Self-identification with Napoleon is a leitmotif for all three characters, each imagining that “he was Napoleon himself” (Tolstoy 155).

This last day, which had arrived out of the blue and solved everything at once, had affected him in an almost entirely mechanical way: as if someone had grabbed his hand and dragged him along, irresistibly, blindly, with unnatural strength, without objections. As if a scrap of his clothing had caught in the wheel of a machine that was now pulling him in. (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 113)

Interestingly, although the impression of an overwhelming external force is recorded as early as the first chapters of the novel (Raskolnikov's experience of learning Alyona Ivanovna will be at home alone is likened to hearing a sentence of execution (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 104)), it is not until the confessional scene in the final section that he is able to identify the nature of that force. It is only then, speaking to Sonya after having examined and discarded other external motives for his crime, that he can articulate this force for what it is — the desperate need to prove to himself that a life of spontaneity, free from casuistry, is possible for him at all. Previous raptures over the Napoleonic ideal have primed him to view any other existence as that of a louse; it cannot escape him now that his own existence is anything but free, since “both in prospect and retrospect, he is constructing his own life as a story, and the whole point about the freedom he desires is that it must not be constructed in this way” (Nuttall 9). The only hope that remains is action, pure action, free from thought:

...if I'd already tormented myself for so many days wondering, “Would Napoleon have gone or wouldn't he?”, then I obviously knew that I was no Napoleon . . . I endured all the agony of this empty talk, Sonya, all of it, and now I just wanted to shake it off. I wanted to kill without casuistry, Sonya, to kill for myself, for myself alone...what I needed to find out, and find out quickly, was whether I was a louse, like everyone else, or a human being. Could I take that step or couldn't I? (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 457)

It becomes apparent that this attempt in the quest for free will is also doomed to failure. Just a inaction (whether deliberate, as with Andrei's cynicism, or involuntary, as with Pierre's intellectual confusion) calls the free will of the wanderer into question, action of this kind, too, diminishes him to a puppet of forces beyond his control. Actions have once again failed to be a genuine expression of a sovereign self, instead becoming a “means of convincing himself that it is possible to continue living...they are at bottom experiments conducted by a self which is itself an experimental projection” (Rahv 27). As Raskolnikov upbraids Sonya “for having destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing” (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 361), he accuses and convicts himself of the same crime. For he, too, has gone through the dark night of the soul and bloodied his hands for a freedom which means nothing — a freedom which is but an exchange of the inertia of rest for the inertia of motion.

3. Resurrection(?)

“Might not there be another freedom, a baptised freedom, which God might love?” (Nuttall 20).

If total freedom, then, is an illusion that leads inevitably to inertia, which is a kind of moral death, the obvious solution would be a renunciation of freedom in favour of the safety of total bondage. This is precisely what neither the wanderer nor his creator can bring himself to do. To Dostoevsky, “the whole human enterprise consists exclusively in man's proving to himself every moment, that he is a man and not a cog” (Dostoevsky *Notes From the Underground* 82), placing freedom front and centre as “man's most precious possession, comprising his ultimate essence” (Zenkovsky 135). Even if complete free will and complete bondage are near-synonyms for a man like Raskolnikov, he continues to push stubbornly onwards toward what he sees as freedom. In the final analysis, one

is forced to conclude with Nuttall that “The truth is that Raskolnikov did what he did in the name of freedom, and neither he nor his creator can bring himself to call that wrong” (Nuttall 20).

The resolution, a baptised freedom which combines recognisable forms of free will with an inner freedom predicated upon spiritual submission, never quite materialises. It is an uneasy truce which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky negotiate for their characters, requiring the willing sacrifice of some portion of existential freedom (which, after all, is not really freedom at all) in order to receive an internal freedom from fetters: a freedom of the soul. By voluntarily accepting that he is in chains, the wanderer paradoxically sets himself free — the weight of universal responsibility which an unfettered freedom would imply lifts from his shoulders, allowing him for the first time to really relish and revel in what freedom means. This fascinating passage, following Pierre’s spiritual resurrection, is a study in overlapping undercurrents of thought:

That which he had been tormented by before, which he had constantly sought, the purpose of life—now did not exist for him...And this very absence of purpose gave him that full, joyful awareness of freedom which at that time constituted his happiness. He could have no purpose, because he now had faith—not faith in some rules, or words, or thoughts, but faith in a living, ever-sensed God...The terrible question “Why?” which formerly had destroyed all his mental constructions, did not exist for him now. Now, to this question “Why?” a simple answer was always ready in his soul: because there is God, that God without whose will not a single hair falls from a man’s head. (Tolstoy 1517)

Notably, this is only a hair’s-breadth removed from modern existentialism — the familiar existentialist position, that there is no intrinsic purpose to life, is invoked and subverted at the last moment by the addition of this clause: purpose is unnecessary when one has faith. This equivocation has all the advantages of Andrei’s cynical position — release from angst and paralysis, allowing one to do at the very least what one can — without its oppressive sense of strain. In locating agency outside oneself, it accomplishes what Raskolnikov’s idolisation of Napoleon did — freedom from the self-consuming cycle of endless reflection — without tipping him over into the inertia of motion, for this notion of God is too vast and all-powerful to permit egoistic self-identification with it. In this manner, “the “annihilation of inertia” results in eternal life: the murderer, Raskolnikov, is liberated from mechanical determinism and begins a new life” (Knapp 115).

However, if the advantages of this ideology are clear, the reason for its acceptance is not. The entire course of these characters’ lives has been engaged in taking up and discarding many such theories, with the primary obstacle being their inability to conjure enough faith for a whole-hearted immersion in them. Andrei has even explicitly admitted the suitability of such a reassuring philosophy to his compulsively self-tormenting cast of a mind, before regretfully concluding that it is beyond his reach precisely because of that cast of mind:

It would be good if everything was as clear and simple as it seems to Princess Marya. How good it would be to know where to look for help in this life and what to expect after it, there, beyond the grave! How happy and calm I’d be, if I could say now: Lord, have mercy on me!...But to whom shall I say it?... Nothing, nothing is certain, except the insignificance of everything I can comprehend and the grandeur of something incomprehensible but most important! (Tolstoy 425)

It is at this impasse that the friction between the author’s polemical goal¹³ and the character’s richly developed

interiority is at its most evident. Having once assembled a three-dimensional and intensely reflective character, the author cannot easily make him submit to an idyllic Orthodox-Russian worldview which is essentially a two-dimensional fiction (an even more stark one given that neither Dostoevsky nor Tolstoy actually belonged to the peasant class whose supposed worldview they so enthusiastically espoused). Since the self which they have created cannot abandon its habits of reflection, it must be destroyed and built afresh to suit the ideology laid aside for it. This process is accomplished through the ubiquitous motif of suffering.

The final, distinguishing difference between these characters' previous enthusiasms and their eventual resurrection into the holy fold is simply the degree to which their selfhood is violently reshaped through the experience of intense physical suffering. In contrast to Prince Andrei's earlier interests in warfare, familial life, or the management of his Bogucharovo estate, the final revelation comes to him after having been fatally wounded by an exploding shell; Pierre, after his flirtations with society life, freemasonry, and self-liberation, comes to the Gospel once he has lived and suffered as a prisoner of war; Raskolnikov, after his Napoleonic ambitions, sees the light only once he has suffered prison labour and illness in Siberia. The physicality of their pain is crucial; it is as though the self can be forcibly jolted from the isolated brain to the community bound body only through an excruciating awareness of the latter. It is unclear how this total annihilation is an improvement; one is forcefully reminded of Raskolnikov's outburst, "They say it's a test I have to endure! But what's the point of all these senseless tests? What? Am I really going to understand any of this any better after twenty years' hard labour, when I'm old and feeble, crushed by suffering and idiocy, than I do now? And what would I be living for then?" (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 557). The reader retains the distinct impression that Dostoevsky, for all his avowed certainties, is not entirely able to silence the echoes of Raskolnikov's furious questioning either. Have these characters emerged from their suffering into a truth too great to be questioned, or have they merely been too broken by their suffering to keep questioning?

The latter supposition is strengthened by the form in which the enlightenment is presented. To distinguish from the previous intellectual obsessions which were "one-sidedly personal, cerebral... [with] the same uneasiness and vagueness" (Tolstoy 1356), Tolstoy and Dostoevsky rely on the purely allegorical and affective technique in the moment of revelation. When Raskolnikov kneels to Sonya, she is the pure icon, and as for him, "how it happened he himself did not know, but suddenly something swept him up and hurled him at her feet" (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 584). When Andrei awakes to spiritual freedom in accepting death, the process of acceptance has already occurred in a dream sequence populated with nebulous mystical imagery. When Pierre finds himself imprisoned with Platon Karataev, he finds only that, "the previously destroyed world was now arising in his soul with a new beauty, on some new and unshakeable foundations" (Tolstoy 1339). As an aesthetic choice, this deliberate vagueness may serve to emphasise how far the cerebral man has been subdued by the true inner world of the soul; to the reader, it establishes the abrupt disjuncture between the character as he has existed so far and the character as he exists now, raising again Raskolnikov's question, why does he have to be so violently annihilated and remade to be worthy?

The aesthetic experience of this new comfort is uncomfortably similar to all the false starts experienced before. Although the loss of self, incoherence of thought, and depth of joy arise from an elevated spiritual position now, the description of them is deeply reminiscent of the raptures and disillusionments already undergone. Without tangible evidence of how and why this particular iteration is different and superior, the reader must fall back simply upon the word of the author — a word which, it would appear, they are unable to make good. Consider,

for instance, this description of Pierre in love, occurring prior to his resurrection:

That terrible question—“Why? What for?”—which used to present itself to him amidst every occupation, was now replaced for him not by another question and not by the answer to the old question, but by her image. (Tolstoy 926)

Love of a mortal woman, here Natasha Rostov, is confounded with the spiritual so as to leave no distinction between the two. Furthermore, instead of following the mystical school of thought which would permit such commingling, Tolstoy is at pains to prove that universal love like Karataev’s, which is to “love everything, everybody”, eventually “meant to love no one, meant not to live this earthly life” (Tolstoy 1353). In other words, total acceptance of the philosophy of the Holy Fool¹⁴ brings freedom of spirit, but the author appears at a loss to reintegrate it into lived experience. It is no coincidence that those who fully embrace it, such as Andrei or Karataev, do not survive long enough to have a fully developed interiority after. This has been read here as an aesthetic weakness, but perhaps it is a token of the irreconcilable nature of the aims of the ideologue and the temperament of the questioner.

Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s characters are at their most convincing in their moments of uncontrolled existential angst, for that has been established as the hallmark of their archetype. Perhaps it is in this that their truest manifestation must remain; for, despite the promise of resurrection, “the story of a man’s gradual renewal and gradual rebirth” (Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment* 586) remains untold. Deep in the hinterland of the consciousness, the Russian wanderer continues to roam.

13 “Every person bears his own purposes within himself and yet bears them in order to serve general purposes that are inaccessible to man.” (Tolstoy 1482)

14 See Krieger, Murray. *The Tragic Vision*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1960. pp. 209-227.

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The Child of Ashalata: State, Conflict and the Female in *Chokher Bali* (2003) and *Rajkahini* (2015)

Anwesh Banerjee

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the complex relationship between violence and the State as experienced by a woman with specific reference to two films — Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (2003) and Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* (2015). The two films are set against the backdrops of the 1905 Bengal Partition and the 1947 Indian Partition and they closely offset female sexuality and the female body against the larger politics of the nation state which is under the threat of cartographic dissection. The paper argues that *Chokher Bali* uses the domestic space and the idea of a house broken under the brunt of adultery as a metaphor for divided Bengal, while *Rajkahini* uses the idea of a brothel located on the border of two emerging nations to comment on the idea of patriarchal assertion over the female body through instances of sexual violence and fracturing of female relationships. The paper will also look at counter-resistance by women to such state sanctioned violence which manifests itself through patriarchal impositions.

Keywords: Partition, bengal, trauma, displacement, gender.

If Lord Curzon's law passes, then from today we will be in two different countries. But sitting in these two respective States, if we brood over our personal sorrows, betrayals and insults - then aren't we accepting defeat at the very onset? Doesn't the true nation reside in the heart Bali? - *Chokher Bali* (translation mine)

1. Introduction

The Bengal Partition of 1905 and the Indian Partition of 1947 were both acts of cartographic butchery committed by external British forces to break the fraternal nationalist public conscience of the common Indians and especially marginalize women. The complex relationship shared by a woman and state-sponsored violence will be examined in this paper with specific reference to two films - Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (2003) and Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* (2015). To establish a connecting link between the two films and thereby the two temporally isolated events of the Bengal and Indian partitions, one can consider the possibility of reading a trans-narrative character who is born at the end of the first film, serving as a witness to the events of the second film, and eventually becoming the citizen of a State born from the anvils of the most violent mass-migration of the last century. Such an interpretation is contingent on the need to realise that violence and trauma are contingent upon the survival of a progeny who has the option to either recuperate from the violence of the preceding generations and move ahead, or remain stuck in the same cycle of violence and engage in the perpetration of trauma.

2. *Chokher Bali* and a divided Bengal

1 All translations are by the author of this paper.

The film is the first installment of Rituparno Ghosh's unofficial Tagore trilogy². It begins with a note to the tunes of an *azaan* which says that Tagore always regretted the original ending of his novel, and if given a chance, he would gladly revise the same. There is something deeply poetic in the way this note is flashed upon the screen even before the opening credits roll to the tune of the *azaan*. The film itself is a narrative about a Hindu Brahmin widow and the fact that the film chooses its primary narratorial departure from the original novel to the tunes of an *azaan* makes it evident that this story is about discordant binaries. These are visible through the movie from the pairs of Binodini and Ashalata or Mahendra and Behari or even the ultimate meta-representation that their interactions assume in relation to the dissecting of the motherland during the Bengal Partition, which will be explored in the paper.

The film follows the story of Binodini, a widow who arrives at No. 9, Darzipara³ Street where Mahendra and his newly-wedded wife, Ashalata, stay. A *de facto* presence in the house is Mahendra's childhood best friend Behari. At one point, in reference to their intimate friendship, Ashalata tells Binodini, "*maa er peter bhai bole bhul kore loke*"⁴ (55:45) to which Binodini replies with a knowing smile, "*Shumbha Nishumbho*⁵ *shottyi maa er peter bhai chhilo bali*"⁶ (55:47). This insertion is of importance in the film because eventually Mahendra and Behari too end up in a position of conflict over the two women in their lives by engaging in an all-destructive play of passion and seduction. Mahendra had rejected Binodini before she got married and became an early widow and while Behari was supposed to be betrothed to Ashalata, Mahendra saw her and decided that if he ever was to marry, he would marry Ashalata alone. We learn later that Mahendra does not approve of Ashalata wearing the necklace Behari had gifted her at their wedding. Ashalata gives it away to Binodini for safekeeping. Eventually when Binodini comes to stay in their house, she engages in an illicit affair with Mahendra while nursing a burning attraction for Behari, who, in contrast to the fiery passion of Mahendra, offers the promise of domestic stability. The intersection of these multiple lives in a singular "passion play" (also the sub-title of the film in English) reveals the seminal dynamics of power and sway that are relayed by women in the domestic space with regard to each other and the men in their lives⁷. Such dynamics, exercised by them in the *antarmahal* or inner chambers of their house, grant them a semblance of statutory agency in a pre-independent Indian society that is yet to see its female citizens rise above the stature of second-class citizens.

The title of the film is *chokher bali*⁸. It is the name Binodini and Ashalata call each other after they become each other's' "*soi*"⁹ or bosom friends.. The fact that the name is interchangeably used by both the women to address each other makes it a narrative not just about Binodini, but also Ashalata. The two of them coalesce into forming a representation of the motherland which later gets ruthlessly dissected by the Partition legislation

2 The other two films being *Noukadubi* (2010) and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012)

3 A literal translation of this would be the lane of darzis, where darzi means a tailor. The idea of tailoring brings in the idea of mending or putting together something that is torn – thereby reinforcing the idea of a broken domestic space in urgent need of mending.

4 Trans. "People mistake them to be brothers of the same womb"

5 Originating in the fifth chapter of *Devi Mahatmyam*, Shumbha and Nishumbha were two Asura brothers who in an attempt to conquer the Three worlds tried to abduct Parvati and were ultimately slain in combat by Kaushiki one of the avatars of Parvati. Their story is a standing example of seduction and fraternal friction.

6 Trans. Shumbha and Nishumbha "were sons of the same mother too"

7 Although Binodini and Ashalata become immediate bosom friends, the audience is never made to forget the superior position occupied by Binodini in the dynamic by sheer virtue of the fact that she has been educated in the English medium and hence portrayed as a forward thinking, "modern" woman as opposed to the illiterate Ashalata.

of Lord Curzon. Much like undivided Bengal, the two women who begin as bosom friends in the same domestic space, get physically separated from each other by virtue of Binodini's betrayal of Ashalata and her guilt-ridden inability to return to the house in Darzipara Street again. Much like the two separated halves of the partitioned land, the two friends find themselves separated across Ashalata's domestic space desecrated by Binodini's betraying act of adultery. Although the end of the film finds Binodini running away from Calcutta, the resigned final image of Mahendra climbing the flight of stairs on his way back home shows the image of a marriage which will always remain scarred by this adultery — much like the country which will continue to deal with the ramifications of partitioning.

If the two women are metaphors for the partitioned land, then the two men position themselves as the external contingent forces who bring the dissection of this land in different ways. In a deeply literal sense, Mahendra breaks apart the bond of the two women by stepping into the platonic space of their friendship, betraying his wife and indulging in an affair with her closest friend. As a result of this, there is a disruption of the sisterhood shared by these two equally lost female characters who sought to live their dreams of cultivated domesticity through the singular man in their lives: Mahendra. As Binodini eventually elaborates in her final letter, this desire for domestication never fructifies¹⁰; instead, it only serves to tear the two women apart forever.

If Mahendra has to be seen beyond the ambit of an adulterer, then one must analyse his presence in terms of the educated, middle-class Bengali *babu*¹¹. Mahendra's provision of a false hope for the widowed Binodini is emblematic in many ways of how the female subject has always been a point of contention for the colonial state to exercise control through the means of seemingly radical reforms — the Widow Remarriage Act¹² and Sati¹³ being a few legislations worthy of mention. As an English-educated man himself, Mahendra experiences an unbearable lust for the intellectual stimulation an affair with Binodini promises him. However, he lacks the radical drive that is required to walk out on his stunted marriage with Ashalata and embrace his tempestuous relationship with Binodini. Mahendra is educated as befits an English doctor; he reads and writes ornate English poetry, has a vast collection of books in his bedroom and is always dressed in a three-piece suit — as opposed to Behari who, at the height of the Swadeshi movement, is seen wearing fabrics which are handwoven in the jamdani weave, exhibiting a desire for attire that is more attuned with the colonised nation at large.

8 Trans. "The sand of my eye"

9 A local tradition largely prevalent among the women of pre-independent Bengal, whereby friends would be required to give made up names to each other

10 In her final letter to Ashalata, Binodini explains how both tried to satiate their desire to build a home by contesting for the passion of the same man. She further elaborates by saying, "*Tatey shaadh o meteni aramader shongshar ta tukro tukro kore bhenge geche*" (2:15:12) Trans. "None among the two of us could satiate our desire for a home. Instead we ended up desecrating the sheer remnants of the seeming home we had to begin with."

11 Sumanta Banerjee describes this elite group of *bhdroloks* as "sons of absentee landlords, East India Company agents and traders who made fortunes in the eighteenth century, various professionals and government servants ... [they] were moving towards the development of certain common standards of behaviour and cultural norms." (128).

12 The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed on 16 July and enacted on 26 July of 1856, legalising the remarriage of widows in all jurisdictions of India under East India Company rule.

13 Opposition to the practice of sati by evangelists like Carey and Hindu reformers like Ram Mohan Roy ultimately led the British Governor-General of India to enact the Bengal Sati Regulation in 1829, declaring the practice of burning or burying alive of Hindu widows to be punishable by the criminal courts.

The predicament of Mahendra, because of his desire for the other woman as opposed to the docile wife figure, is a representation of the Bengali *babus*, their straddling of two vastly different cultures and their inability to choose and resort to a singular culture. There is a strong desire to imitate the West as it presents the promise of something unseen. In this case, Binodini is not just the sensuous half-clad widow but also the possibility of political performance in terms of feeding into the discourse of widow remarriage¹⁴ whereas there is the undeniable promise and attachment to the national roots represented through Ashalata, the illiterate and naive¹⁵ wife who is clad in rich fabrics of jamdani embroidery.

Eventually, Binodini not only rejects Mahendra in favour of Behari but also exhibits a stronger desire to settle with him in Mahendra's stead. The unsullied patriotism of Behari seems to be a safer option for a woman of her stature, indicating a need to seek shelter in times of conflict under a male figure in a world that has little space for a lone widow. Without the sheltering presence of Behari, the only option left for Binodini, with the accompanying tag of an adultress, would be to prostitute herself. The first interaction Binodini has with Behari is one that evolves into a war of wits over the pruning of courtyard trees¹⁶. One of their most important exchanges concerns Binodini's desire to go to one of Bipin Pal's¹⁷ rallies. This entire sequence captures women's larger need to align with various modes of overt and covert resistance in the face of conflicts. In this case, Binodini's fate will be threatened in the event of the alignment of her fate with Mahendra who will forever be a reluctant participant in the British domination of the Indian colony. While Mahendra engages in an adulterous affair with Binodini, he lacks the capacity to walk out on his marriage with Ashalata and marry Binodini, whose widowed status adds another layer of social stigma to their relationship. This stands in opposition to Behari, whose resistance, though the subject of ridicule, will always offer a safer alternative to the women in question. It is he who first rejects Binodini's advances, denying to take advantage of her vulnerable state while also proceeding to be the only man over the course of the film who willingly and actively offers to marry her.

In the final act of the film, Binodini disappears from the lives of all the characters after refusing Behari's proposal of marriage. We hear Binodini's voice as Ashalata reads the final letter and realises her bosom friend has left in her stead. The body of a woman and the voice of another is used here not only to disembody Binodini but also to show that the now fractured nation disallows respite and refuge and instead hurls her into a vortex of fraught sisterhood.

The very idea of *desh* is addressed by Binodini in her letter. It is interesting to note how Ghosh, who is credited for writing the adapted screenplay, uses the word *desh*; in the Bengali context, it applies to both the country and the countryside. Binodini talks about Ashalata and incessantly questions her on why Maqbool (the male househelp) had a "*desh-beri*"¹⁸ (2:14:07) (country house) and she didn't. Binodini proceeds to elaborate on the idea of this very *desh* and says that the true *desh* (this time referring to the country) was an ideal that resides in the heart. In both their cases, that ideal home was represented by the ninth house of Darzipara Street where Ashalata

14 In the pivotal picnic sequence, Mahendra mocks Behari and his activism by saying "*hyan bidhoba bibaho hoye geche, sati pratha hoye gechey eibare naari der pancha swami pratha ta kore phelo*" (50:26) Trans. "Yes, widow remarriage is taken care of, sati has been banned, you take up the cause of ensuring polygamy for women as seen in Mahabharat where Draupadi married five men."

15 Ashalata is unable to realise violence from passionate sex, and in one of their earlier encounters Binodini warns Ashalata against engaging in such sexual behaviour which leaves her upper torso with multiple bleeding cuts.

16 Behari questions Binodini's choice of pruning the trees by asking if she was aware of Jagdish Chandra Bose's discovery of plants being living beings to which Binodini replies by saying that by the same logic, drinking tea leaves too should be disallowed.

as a young arrives bride married to Mahendra and Binodini arrives as a young widow seeking refuge and respite.

The letter at once creates the idea of the domestic space as a metaphor for the Bengal motherland which, as the film progresses, is under the looming threat of being dissected by the law of Lord Curzon. Hence, the female gets systematically confined within the walls of the house where the affairs of the domestic order and the affairs of the heart come together to present a larger allegorical narrative of the division of a nation by external agents. The house, through its many moments of harmony and shared joy, also becomes a site of resistance for the women. In the face of being ripped apart by the designs of an essentially masculinist nation State, they choose to untangle the knots of their sisterhood in a form of passive resistance where the relationship of the female body to State oppression becomes a standing tale of resilience and endurance. It is also a story¹⁹ that will be passed down, as requested by Binodini, to the child of Ashalata who would grow up to face in his youth the tale of yet another dissection of national territory: that of the Indian nation itself.

3. *Rajkahini*, the State and female disembodiment

If we do assume that Ashalata carries her pregnancy to a terminal point, and that she does give birth to a child, then the child will be approximately forty years old in context of the timeline of Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini*. The fulcrum of the film is the 1947 Partition of India and it begins with an encounter between Sir Cyril Radcliffe and Lord Mountbatten where the two discuss the pending partition of the land which is something that Mountbatten describes as a "bloody surgery" (21:40) involving "sever[ing] the arms of a nation" (21:33). The story is centred on a brothel which, owing to its unique location in the middle of a deserted stretch of land, unwittingly becomes the spot through which the eastern Indo-Pak border passes. The border not only passes through the dilapidated brothel but also ends up dividing it into two, making it the responsibility of the Border Commission officials to ensure the timely eviction of the women living inside the brothel. Trouble arises when the women of the brothel, led by madam Begum Jaan, refuse to leave the property. Instead, the women declare open war on the State which has systematically ensured the collapse of their agency — first with regard to their identity as pariah sex-workers and second by evicting them from the spatial matrix where alone they had absolute unquestioned authority and dignity.

Partition violence has been largely characterised by collateral sexual violence against women. It is visualised in the film with a sequence of cross-cutting where the verdict on which country the Muslim majority Murshidabad should fall under is juxtaposed with the brutal gang-rape of a woman tied to a cot. The arbitrary dissection of State apparatus, mutating the female body into a site of wartime violence. Such violence, beyond turning the motherland happens in the context of a literal violation of the female body by men. The rapists embody turning the motherland happens in the context of a literal violation of the female body by men. The rapists embody the State apparatus, mutating the female body into a site of wartime violence. Such violence, beyond turning the female

17 Bipin Chandra Pal was an orator, social reformer and Indian Independence freedom fighter. He was one third of the trio "Lal Bal Pal", one of the main architects of the Swadeshi movements, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and one of the staunchest opposers of the Bengal partition.

18 Trans. "Country house"

19 In her letter, Binodini requests Ashalata to educate her child, irrespective of their sex, in the hope that one day the child itself silencing her voice. This will prove to Ashalata what a desh or a nation truly means. These words are deeply prophetic because by the time this child grows up, India will gain independence and walk into an era that will be spent defining the Nation State at large.

body into a property of the State, also serves to take away the autonomy of the woman by is seen through the character of Shabnam, who is so deeply traumatised after a gang rape that she is left unable to employ the tool of language to express her thoughts and emotions. All she is now capable of doing is screaming—a raw, animalist scream which has no words. Such a disjunct expression of agony without the coherence of language shows how State violence may render women incapable of accessing the means of communication within its space.

When the eviction notice reaches these women, Begum Jaan questions the officers as to why an order directed from cities as far off as Karachi and Delhi should affect their daily functioning and require them to leave their sole site of sustenance²⁰. It is also a space where these women can demand to be respected along terms of their choosing and as Begum Jaan proclaims, it is a space of absolute equality, where social distinctions cease to exist²¹. Even as these women decide to consider the possibility of running away, Koli, a Dalit prostitute in the brothel, tells Begum Jaan²² that the cost of leaving the brothel and being sacrificed on the altar of national politics will cause them to be reduced to a status worse than beggars on the streets for everywhere beyond the four walls of the brothel, it is a man's world.

In the final act of the film where the assassin Kabir tries to burn down the house after an open combat with the woman, he tells the officials to vacate the area because, "*bolchilam ki karta ei bastuhara-der niye amar chhele pulera ektu amod ahlahd korbe ar ki. Apnara ashun, eishob apnara dekhte parben na*"²³ (2:26:07). Yet again in this moment of conflict, the female body offers resistance, this time through the very body which the State uses to inflict torture and violence. In a chilling sequence, Buchki, the pre-pubescent child of Juthika (a prostitute from the brothel) is caught by a police officer who demands to rape Juthika while they try to escape the brothel. In an unprecedented moment, Buchki steps forward and unclothes herself before the officer, causing him to retch and retreat, unable to bear the image of a prepubescent girl offering with resilience and grit the very same body he sought to violate through forceful submission. In the final stretch of the film, the women are seen closing the door of the burning brothel and walking in as they decide to cling onto their shared sisterhood and offer a seemingly passive yet chilling resistance through self-immolation to the masculinist State which operates through such aggressive performances of violence.

The brothel, notwithstanding the ravages of the fire, becomes a larger symbol for the nation which, despite external violence, continues to stand as seen in the closing sequence of the film where nearby villagers come to see a heavily burnt and sooty structure. Despite the failure of internal resistance, the structure continues to stand strong, as is the case with the idea of the Indian nation which continues to exist beyond the arbitrary dissection of its spatial boundaries. In the process of this external violation, the female self gets disembodied as seen and suggested in one of the earlier scenes of the film.

20 Begum Jaan in abject anger challenges a social activist positioned in their brothel to marry one of the women in her brothel, for something only that radical would matter to her as opposed to performative celebrations of Independence in a country still ridden by religious, gender and caste binaries.

21 Begum Jaan at one point says, "Hindu, Musalman, achyut, brahman kothe tey kono farak nei" (25:06) (Trans. There is no difference between Hindus, Muslims, Indians or English inside the brothel - everyone is the same there.) At another point also in the film, pointing to a Brahmin customer wearing the sacred thread she asks if he was aware that the woman he had slept with was a Dalit.

22 "E deshe rani hok ba zaad, ekhane toh shob mohojjoder haate. Kothay jabo?" (2:05:45) Trans. "In this country, what is the point of being a queen or a whore, since everything is in the hands of men. Where will we go?"

In what begins as an act of seduction (49:20), Rubina straddles her lover, pimps and makes him trace her breast and then her vagina, commenting that both are little more than clumps of muscles serving reproductive functions. She warns her lover against the dangers of identifying herself with either of these body parts before proceeding to trace her own tears and using them as the true markers of her identity. This act of the female identifying with a product of the body — a product which is usually seen as an expression of pain and grief — collapses the need to look at the body as a site which can be devoured by the masculinist State force in areas of conflict. Rather, it becomes an example of female resistance whereby the female self becomes something unclaimable even though the state continues to oppress and mutilate its body in the name of collateral wartime violence.

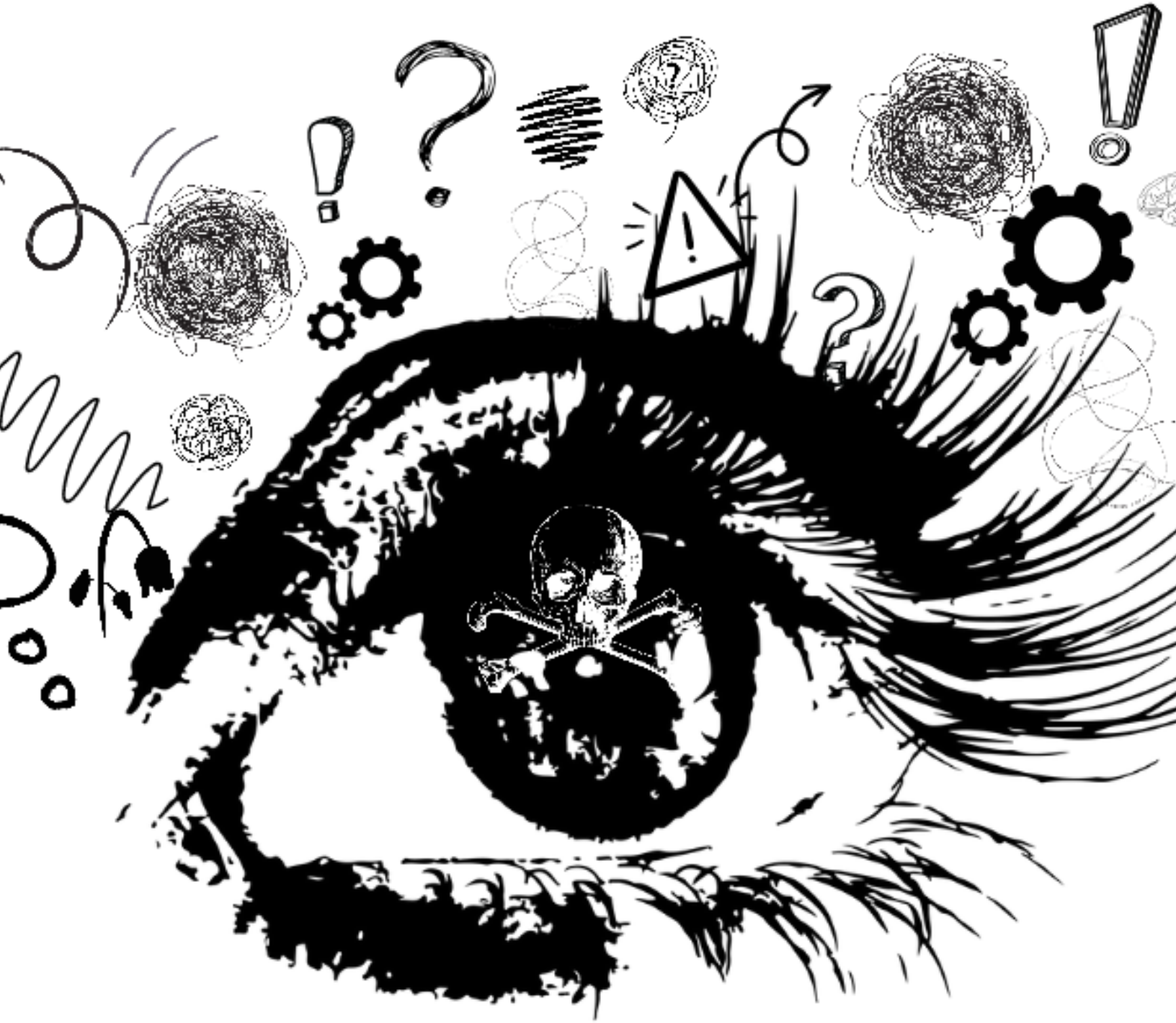
4. Conclusion

In light of the previous above arguments which clearly posit a relationship abjectly fraught with violence between the State and the female body, one can hope that the child of Ashalata, notwithstanding their gender, will grow up in a successive nation state whose identity is divorced from the reality of its form. The body of the nation state is deeply mutilated through the act of two partitions, one successful and the other a failed attempt. The repeated clinical, cartographic operation of the nation beyond a point makes it a deformed object in whose soul lies its identity. In the aftermath of the violent Partition, it will come to be codified in the governing strictures of the Indian Constitution. The reality of the events which the child of Ashalata was born of and the abject violence of the events which they witness paves the way for viewers: the creation of a larger social conscience which will stop viewing the body and the state as a gendered commodity, capable of inflicting and receiving violence in times of conflict.

23 Trans. “I would urge you to vacate now. My boys would like to have some fun with these displaced homeless women now. I don’t think it is a sight you will particularly be able to bear.”

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CONSUMPTION

Raskolnikov's Absolution by the Reader: The Redemptive Power of Dostoyevsky's Narrative Strategy

Nooria Fatima

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of sympathetic reader responses in the context of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It argues that to a great extent, the construction of the protagonist Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov is a narrative seduction of readers who undergo a moral disengagement which allows them to separate the character from his crime and questions of morality. The aim of this paper is to analyse the particularities of Dostoyevsky's narrative and those of his characters that enable and shape the sympathetic reader response which not only accepts but also justifies the actions of a criminal celebrated as an anti-hero.

Keywords: Reader response, morality, narrative, redemption, Dostoyevsky.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a murderer who kills two women with an axe in cold blood, manages to captivate the reader and hold onto their empathy even in the face of complete lack of remorse. The morally ambiguous yet heroic outlaw is a source of fascination, however reluctant, for the reluctant audience which is made to revise its moral standing. This is partly engineered by the creator's narrative technique and partly by the reader's own predisposition. The significance of the latter is explored by reader response theory which privileges the contributions and takeaways of the reader from a text, making them an active, constituent presence within the microcosm of the text. Being enthralled by a character that represents everything the reader should conventionally be repulsed by is not a new or rare phenomenon. Milton's Satan is a mouthpiece of very compelling arguments so much so that Stanley Fish deems *Paradise Lost* as the ground of recreation of the Fall of the reader who is seduced by them¹. However, the techniques that establish this unconditional loyalty between the reader and character change with the author. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's works, as noted by Terras, "encompass antagonistic philosophies and value systems. He is an excellent "devil's advocate" (6-7). This excellence is borne of the depth of his understanding of the psychology at play when it comes to complex characters, making his narrative realistic and relatable. In terms of influencing and seducing the reader, the possible plays are for empathy and sympathy, the former being relatively easier to achieve if personal experiences lend a more invested understanding into a predicament or position. The experiential reader response theory perspective was used by J.A. Shelton² to present a thesis on his reading of *Crime and Punishment* as an inmate serving a sentence for attempted murder:

1 For a detailed explanation, see *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* published by Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 51-71.

2 Jeremiah Adam Shelton approached the text with his experience as an inmate serving a 38-year-sentence in Illinois Department of Corrections for attempted murder. He emphasises that in Raskolnikov, the author captured with eerie accuracy his own state of mind before, during and after the crime.

For me, reading *Crime and Punishment* involved Raskolnikov's invading my personal space. More than any other novel I have read, *Crime and Punishment* made me relive in intimate detail the worst part of my life...in the end, Dostoevsky was able to capture the best and the worst of myself. (70-71)

Identification with the character is the fastest way to acceptance, if not forbearance. However, this works in reverse if the reader has been a victim of such a perpetrator in life off the page. These two cases deal with a reader who is specifically predisposed towards murder. The more difficult task for Dostoyevsky is the moral disengagement³ and the extraction of sympathy and empathy from a readership which is morally conditioned by society against murder.

Raskolnikov and the reader both undergo moral disengagement in different timelines on and off the page (Raskolnikov has already disengaged when the novel begins), with the former's disengagement triggering and shaping that of the latter. Bandura also put forth the specific processes which enable this, and if we see them in context of this paper, they are: moral justification (the extraordinary man theory⁴ of Raskolnikov; the reader's belief that he would not have murdered if he was not extremely ill and had not lost his way in casuistry), euphemistic labelling (the utilitarian argument), advantageous comparison (Raskolnikov's view that his present drudgery pales in comparison to the heroic deeds he will eventually do; the reader's favourable comparison of Raskolnikov with Svidrigailov: see this paper's section titled "Comparison, Likeness and Love"), displacement of responsibility and diffusion of responsibility (the reader can pin responsibility on the author's narrative), disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences (Raskolnikov believes he will get away with the crime; the reader disregards the implications of condoning a murder by compartmentalising it as purely fiction) and dehumanisation (the target, Alyona Ivanovna, is continually described throughout the text as a "noxious louse").

For the aforementioned audience, it can be presupposed that murder is illegal, immoral, a sin and goes against the basic tenets of humanity. Keeping this in mind, the very beginning has the reader sided with Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov simply because he is the first character introduced:

In early July, in exceptional heat, towards evening, a young man left the garret he was renting in S—y Lane, stepped outside, and slowly, as if in two minds, set off towards K—n Bridge. (5)

3 A term within social psychology first conceptualised by Albert Bandura in 1999. It involves the accommodation of unethicity by indulging in cognitive restructuring of the unethical event to register it as morally justifiable/worthy.

4 Raskolnikov writes an article titled "On Crime" delineating this theory which is a prototype of Nietzsche's concept of *Übermensch*. It divides people into two categories- the "ordinary" and the "extraordinary." Ordinary people spend their existence being obedient and without (being capable of or entitled to) making waves. The extraordinary man, on the other hand, is capable of and entitled to transgression if it is required for the fulfilment of his "idea" which will reap benefits for the entire humankind. He is heroic and above petty constructed laws and morality of ordinary men. Raskolnikov cites as an example that if Newton's discoveries required the bloodshed of the obstacles in his way then this bloodshed would be justified. "If such a man needs, for the sake of his idea, to step right over a corpse, over blood, then in view he may, inside himself, as a matter of conscience, grant himself permission to step over this blood" (312). He is inspired by this supposition and fancies himself to be an extraordinary man. Therefore, for him, his murder of Alyona Ivanovna is a small deed compared to the heroic ones he will do in his future with his success. The failure to cope in the aftermath of his crime is not a product of remorse but of his failure to become the extraordinary man. Being an incessantly proud man, this is a matter of unbearable humiliation for him.

At this point in the narrative, there are no morally objectionable instances to prevent his character from establishing itself to be close to the reader. Raskolnikov is a young and handsome former student who is twenty-three years of age and loved by his family. There is no hint of murder or robbery: only the sense that the young man is poor, ashamed and ill. This initial loyalty is continually encouraged and tested. The narrative technique sustains the suspense by shrouding significant details with ambiguity. In the first chapter, the long-plotted murder of Alyona Ivanovna is referred to by Raskolnikov as “a thing like that... Can I be serious about that?” (8) flippantly, without mentioning that “that” is murder. Raskolnikov’s theory of the “extraordinary” man which propels the murder(s) is only revealed much later when Lieutenant Porfiry Petrovich brings up his article. Rosenblatt states that the “basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues” (54) and the lack of cues to Raskolnikov’s complete psyche makes the readers complacent. With the unknowingly limited information provided, they build a house of cards with their assumptions about characters, their intentions and situations. In terms of Affective Disposition Theory⁵, these are “story schemas” which serve as “cognitive pegs upon which to hang their initial interpretations and expectations of characters” (Raney 354).

However, at the moment of completion of a character’s construct in the reader’s mind, Dostoyevsky introduces subtle details which crash into the structure, collapsing it. After the test visit, Raskolnikov expresses disgust and hesitation over his intended action of murder: “How could I ever think of something so awful? ... it’s all so filthy, so nasty, so foul! And there was I, for a whole month...” (12-13). This last half-sentence, innocuously slipped in, subverts his entire torment. In the very next paragraph, he scoffs at this agitation:

How stupid to get so flustered! My distress was purely physical! Just one glass of beer, a piece of rusk and there you are – in the space of a second, the mind becomes stronger, thoughts clearer, intentions firmer!
(13)

Wasiolak maintains that “the reader is constantly being challenged by Dostoevsky to reappraise what he has already concluded” (51). However, the grip the narrative has on the sympathy of the reader is unyielding. In fact, this piece-by-piece method is much more efficient in blurring the lines of morality than an outright revelation of murderous intent; the morally challenging details become easier to digest without initiating sudden and strong cognitive dissonance and discomfort.

2. Positions and Predispositions

Raskolnikov’s intended victim, Alyona Ivanovna, has no pertinently redeeming qualities. She is a business-minded moneylender who exploits her sister and charges her borrowers exorbitantly high rates of interest. Though objectively unsettling, her death does not have as much potential to affect the reader to a great extent due to the absence of favourable personalisation. Moreover, it is unmistakably evident that the murders are neither Dostoyevsky’s nor the novel’s primary priority. After they are committed, the only importance they are given is in their relation to Raskolnikov’s future⁶. The focus of the novel, and consequently of the reader, shifts to his illness, his relationships, his dreams and his motives. This permits movement away from the gruesome murders and reduces their significance. The intimacy of having access to the interiority of Raskolnikov’s mind naturally allows the reader to establish a relational contract with him, despite knowing that he is a murderer fairly early in the story.

⁵ Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) is applied to explore the cause of enjoyment of narratives or characters by audiences. It postulates that the synthesis of emotional disposition and moral judgement play a role in determining liking.

The narrative is saturated with repetitive, functional descriptions of the acute torment of Raskolnikov's physical and mental illness. It is decidedly impossible for most readers to not feel sympathy for a person who is obviously and acutely ill, for a literally and spiritually lost soul.

Elements of sociopathy are strongly present in him; it is not the act of murder he has committed which troubles him but the conclusion that he is not an extraordinary man but a "louse" (330) who cannot deal with the consequences of his actions. This failure has a larger significance because it is the destruction of a philosophy of life which had governed his thoughts and actions for a considerable period of time. It is akin to the shaking of a foundational belief perceived to be unshakeable. This disillusionment splinters his perspective and he no longer sees any point to his life and future until the final page of the Epilogue. His theory and actions were mistakes and it is his mistakes which bring him closer to the reader. At a personal level, this involves the ethic of reciprocity wherein we strive to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves if we were similarly situated: the fear of making errors which renders forgiveness or redemption an impossibility is real: "the space Raskolnikov inhabits is the reader's own personal one" (Peace 15). Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel add:

We want people to know that in many ways, we respond to entertainment characters as we would to individuals in real life...we judge characters and their actions based on the character's intentions, and to a lesser degree, on the outcomes that the character's actions produce. However, our tolerance for immorality is likely greater in entertainment than it is in real life. (179)

The "character's intentions" are projected as philanthropic in the utilitarian argument. He dreams of being a benefactor of society as an extraordinary figure, committing a crime so that others do not have to and bringing about a better future for all. The text is peppered with hints of Raskolnikov's conscience even if he refuses to acknowledge it. His fever dreams of a mare being beaten mercilessly and the incessant laughter of his murdered victim unsettles him beyond the trepidation of being caught:

'Thank God, just a dream!' he said, sitting up under a tree and drawing deep breaths. 'But what's happening? Hope it's not a fever coming on: what a hideous dream!' His whole body felt broken, his soul troubled and dark... 'My God!' he exclaimed. 'Will I really – I mean, really – actually take an axe, start bashing her on the head, smash her skull to pieces? . . . Will I really slip in sticky, warm blood, force the lock, steal, tremble, hide, all soaked in blood . . . axe in hand? . . . Lord, will I really?' He shook as he said this. (73)

In a constant state of delirious confusion, Raskolnikov can never label his emotions and feelings, except pain and fear, and even their causes remain elusive to him: "a long unfamiliar feeling burst over his soul like a wave and softened it at once" (495) and "there was something that demanded to be resolved at once, but it could neither be grasped nor put into words" (530).

Prior to the murders, two positive aspects of Raskolnikov's personality are revealed — his silent, kind gestures for strangers and the image of a good son through his mother's letter in which she waxes poetic about his excellence, capability and potential. Thus, in the eyes of the reader who does not yet know just how long he had been planning the murder, first impressions manage to have lasting effects. Placing the idea of Alyona

6 Not a single person mourns the passing of Alyona Ivanovna. If the murder is in discussion, it is always accompanied by concern for Raskolnikov's physical, mental and spiritual health.

Ivanovna first in the mouth of another young student and making Raskolnikov overhear the conversation also reduces the amount of righteous blame placed on him. It suggests that Raskolnikov is only a person who has acted on ideas already in the “air”. This conversation between the strangers in the pub ends with a dare, unwittingly offered:

‘Here you are speaking and speechifying, but tell me: are you going to kill the old woman *yourself*, or aren’t you?’

‘Of course not! I’m talking about justice...It’s not about me.’

‘Well, as I see it, if you don’t dare do it yourself, there’s no justice to speak of!’ (129)

This implies that if Raskolnikov *does* dare to do it himself, then that would be justice. Thus, a heroic element is attached to the act, serving as confirmation bias⁷ for him. In Part V, he exclaims to Sonya⁸, “I killed *for a dare!*” (502). It is clear to the reader that Raskolnikov, too, is a victim. He is a victim of economic destitution, illness, loss of faith but, above all, he is a victim of “casuistry” (80). “Analysing the sealed space of Raskolnikov’s mind, Dostoyevksy shows how theory estranges life and casuistry-wisdom.” (Ready xxviii-xxix). This estrangement escalates to the extent that a murder is committed only to check if the theory can be applied to himself. He tells Sonya, “. . .taking that same road again, I might never have repeated the murder...I needed to find out...whether I was a louse, like everybody else, or a human being?” (503)

3. The Divide as Bridge

Another obstacle to the perception of Raskolnikov as a hateful criminal is the “schism” (*raskol*) in him. It is as if the murderer and the beloved son, brother and friend are two different people with different inclinations, leaving the reader divided as well. It is, as his friend Razumikhin points out to his mother Pulkheria Alexandrovna, “as if two contrasting characters were taking turns inside him.” (257) The novel’s opening line itself establishes this — “..the young man ...stepped outside, and slowly, *as if in two minds* set off towards K—n Bridge” (5, emphasis added). Raskolnikov harbours no sympathy for Alyona Ivanovna. She is simply a “louse” whom he does not regret killing even once but the same Raskolnikov does not hesitate to help strangers even if it leaves his pockets empty. Semyon Zakharovich Marmeladov is met as a stranger in a pub whose life’s tale garners no admiration for him but “the thought of helping had already occurred to (Raskolnikov)” (32). He gives away the last roubles to the family for his funeral and goes out of his way to try and save the girl on the street from a sexual predator. There are instances in the novel where it appears that the dark murderer inside him resurfaces almost forcefully, here is one:

. . .he simply could not understand where he’d found such guile, not least because there were moments when his mind seemed to go dark, and as for his body, he could barely feel it. (92)

Thus, it is difficult to pin responsibility on Raskolnikov when the reader is left as confused as he is, with only a vague sense of conviction. For all his haughty and hateful remarks, his actions leave one clutching at straws like

⁷ The tendency to search, process, favour and remember information which supports one’s own beliefs or interpret it to the same effect.

⁸ Sofya (Sonya/Sonechka) Semyonovna, the daughter of Marmeladov, is forced to take up prostitution to feed her family. Her first name, Sofya – Sophia – is significant for the implication of wisdom. She is the poster child for the benevolent Christian faith, patience and forgiveness. Despite his mockery and dismissal, she urges Raskolnikov to take up suffering and repent for his crime.

Sonya to weed out hints of salvageable emotions which can be used to bring him back to the folds of humanity. One such attempt is taking inspiration from Sonya's plight when Dunya⁹ curtsies to her despite the mismatched relations of class and propriety, "(a)s if Avdotya Romanovna's courtesy and attention were a burden and torment to her" (286). Sonya is pained by the gracious respect because she believes herself to be unworthy of it. In her eyes, she is one of the greatest sinners. This notion gives a valuable insight into the way Raskolnikov is also tormented by all expressions of sympathy, suggestions of redemptive paths and his resistance to the love of his mother, sister, Razumikhin and Sonya. He, too, feels unworthy of these. This prompts the possibility of underlying but unspoken guilt.

Even when almost all characters suspect him, not a single person condemns Raskolnikov. There is no moral yardstick within the text goading the reader. Far from condemnation, the responses are steeped in deep worry, concern, compassion and pity. Sonya's first words after his confession to her are "Oh what have you done to yourself?" (494). Similarly, Razumikhin and Dunya are steadfast in their loyalty to him. Porfiry Petrovich, the figure of authority from whom we expect a conventional reaction, also treats him almost like a wayward child whose crime is no bigger than lying about stealing the neighbour's pie. He considers "the dark, fantastical deed, a modern deed" to have been committed by "a heart of a man clouded over...stirred up by theories, a visible determination to take the first step" (547). There is no talk of legal violations and consequent punishment by law, only of a suffering that will help Raskolnikov's soul. In the absence of any overt moral condemnation within the universe of the text, the reader is free to take the stance of forbearance comfortably.

In this manner, Sonya and the reader are similarly situated in their adaptation to Raskolnikov's crime. Both are forced to (inconclusively) process and reconcile the contradictory facets of his personality and actions. Sonya's confused, pitiful and sympathetic reactions to Raskolnikov's confession are viscerally relatable: "How can this be true? Lord, what sort of truth is that? Who could believe it?... how could you give away your last rouble, but kill to steal?" (496) and "And what a strange way he had of putting things: it almost seemed to make sense, but...How on earth? How, Lord?" (500). Being an instantly likeable and trustworthy character on account of her suffering and self-sacrifice, this struggle of Sonya is validating and corroborative of the reader's own: "'N-No,' whispered Sonya, guilelessly and timidly, 'but...speak, speak! I'll understand – I'll understand everything *inside myself!*' she begged him" (497). The reader, like her, cannot understand Raskolnikov except "inside (my)self." However, as exciting as a character's rebellion is, readers expect satisfaction found in the safety of sanction. To appease the moral and legal orientation, it is anticipated that there will be a restoration of balance. Raskolnikov knows that "Sonya was an implacable sentence, an irrevocable decision. It was her road or his" (556). Thus, even though Raskolnikov remains unrepentant when it comes to the murder of Alyona Ivanova, he does choose Sonya's road: he chooses life.

4. Comparison, Likeness and Love

Human sensibilities are stretchable on a spectrum. Continuous exposure to certain phenomena leads to desensitisation and/or normalisation. This affects the limits to which our moral compass can accept or justify an action. Here enters the psychology of the "seriousness" of crime: certain crimes come to affect us less when worse crimes come to the fore. What is worse than a remorseless murderer? A remorseless serial rapist and murderer. Thus, the

9 Avdotya (Dunechka, Dunya) Romanovna Raskolnikova, Raskolnikov's sister who worked as a governess for Marfa Petrovna and Svidrigailov.

character of Arkady Svidrigailov becomes a foil to Raskolnikov, making it more comfortable to accept the latter. Svidrigailov's entry into the narrative is negatively oriented. His designs on Dunya and the stories of his perverse brutality cast him as a villainous character from the start. The most interesting notion here is the fact that when it comes to the bare essentials, there are more similarities between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov than differences. The latter himself states it multiple times; for instance, he says "I cannot help feeling you and I are somehow matched" (351). Both have a fervent desire and a rationale to back up the desire — this is made clear through Raskolnikov's extraordinary man theory and Svidrigailov's justifications such as him saying "Women find it very, very pleasurable to be insulted" (339). Both transgress the bounds of societal law and morality to satiate their aspirations. However, it is Svidrigailov who receives the readers' disgust. This can be attributed to the moral disgust associated with sexual crimes as well as the lack of Svidrigailov's personal narratorial perspective in the formative chapters (unlike with Raskolnikov) combined with outright condemnation by all characters: "You're simply repugnant, whether or not you're right which is why people don't want to have anything to do with you and send you packing" (338). However, as explained by Ralph Ellison:

The novel is a complex agency for the symbolic depiction of experience, and it demands that the writer be willing to look at both sides of characters and issues...the form of the novel imposes its morality upon the novelist by demanding a complexity of vision and an openness to the variety and depth of experience ... (When Dostoyevsky) chose to depict characters identified with such groups he gave them all the human complexity that the form and action of the novel demand. (428)

Dostoyevsky's treatment of Svidrigailov reflects this. It is easy to state upon a cursory glance that one major difference between the two characters is conscience. The physical and mental anguish of Raskolnikov is equated with the prodding of his conscience while Svidrigailov's statement of "My personal conscience...is entirely untroubled" (338) is taken at face value. However, Dostoyevsky shows the last hours of Svidrigailov's life before he commits suicide through his perspective. Then, it is revealed that he is not nearly as unaffected and blasé. He, like Raskolnikov, is tormented with nightmares symbolic of the children he has exploited and the ghost of Marfa Petrovna. He settles his affairs by monetarily securing the union of Sonya and Raskolnikov in Siberia and the financial future of the children of Marmeladov and Katerina Ivanovna and his fiancé. Thus, the author plays on the sympathy of the reader making them feel even for Svidrigailov who was, for most of the narrative, nothing but a sadistic molester. His death by suicide becomes especially poignant when one remembers the instances of his fear of death, particularly self-inflicted death.

Thus, it is not conscience which differentiates the two male characters but the redemptive arc of love. Svidrigailov's insatiable passion for women and obsession, which he considers the basics of his life, are concentrated on Dunya in a way which goes beyond the simple gratification of his sexual desire. He has travelled to Petersburg, connived, bribed, lived on the least appetising foods with her being his sole objective. When all avenues of dialogue fail, his patriarchal entitlement, misplaced sense of propriety and male ego resurface and he resorts to his usual form of coercion. Dunya "realised that he would sooner die than let her go" (596), but she is only a symbolic figure. In the beginning, she was the governess who thwarted his desires by refusing to submit like the other women. In the end, she became a beacon of a sort that could provide some measure of satisfaction not to the body but to the soul. When this ultimate woman rejects him, all his illusions shatter:

‘So you don't love me?’ he asked quietly.

Dunya shook her head.

‘And...you can’t? Ever?’ he whispered despairingly.

‘Never!’ whispered Dunya.

There followed a moment of dreadful, dumb struggle in Svidrigailov’s soul. (596)

He immediately lets her go after this. When this objective is suddenly lost, he is left without a driving force. There is no redemption for him and he is not particularly looking for it either. On the other hand, Raskolnikov’s unbreakable bond with Sonya forms easily and unaccountably. Nothing diminishes her love for him, whether it is his confession of murder, his lack of remorse [“In what way am I guilty before them? Why should I go...Maybe I can still fight” (505)] or his refusal to surrender to suffering (he comes out of the police station without confessing and only returns when he sees an anguished Sonya waiting outside). He is emotionally and verbally cruel and mocks her. However, her resolve to love him and, more importantly, suffer with him is unwavering. She encourages him to seek the path to God, to seek the blessing of a new life like the raising of Lazarus¹⁰. There is a satisfying beauty in “the murderer and the harlot, who’d come together so strangely to read the eternal book” (393) and their efforts, or rather *her* efforts, are not in vain: “Love had resurrected them, and the heart of each contained the inexhaustible springs of life for the heart of another” (657). He still is nowhere near her religiosity but she does become a medium for future possibility: “How can her beliefs not be my beliefs?” (658). This makes the conclusion realistic. A complete and utter surrender would be a falsity, out of line with the character developed in the six parts. The epilogue is meant to direct the tale towards “the story of a man’s gradual renewal and gradual rebirth” (658). For the present, it becomes sufficient that he has chosen the possibility of the potential of life.

5. Conclusion

This “redemption” of Raskolnikov and his relationship with Sonya has a deeper significance than the aesthetic and moral appeasement of the reader. People need to believe that they possess and live by free will, whether illusory or not. Amidst ever-present restrictions imposed by law and societal norms, the transgressions of the anti-hero become an embodiment of free will and choice, proving that the shackles of society are not unbreakable. Thus, he is admired because he dares, which the conventional person will most likely refrain from doing. Nevertheless, despite the existence of a moral grey area and layered complexity, too much evasion from objective morality can move beyond vicarious pleasure or catharsis into the realm of cognitive dissonance. It can deliver the message that the anti-hero is freer than the reader, or that he is the only one free. Therefore, there needs to be a grounding element which roots him so he remains “one of us” (Cawelti 78). In Raskolnikov’s case, it is the affirmation of love and religious faith. Love is an elusive emotion because it is the least traceable or quantifiable. Its power, however, is undeniable. Raskolnikov comes to accept that he needs and desires human companionships. Moreover, the affective potential of love carries specific appeal to readership which has sustained the genre of romance. Thus, Raskolnikov’s redemption through Sonya is rendered worthy, acceptable and even endearing.

Without noting the above discussed quirks of the narrative and plot construction, it bewilders the uninitiated reader to contemplate empathy for a delusional murderer.

¹⁰ Lazarus is a biblical figure associated with ideas of suffering and restoration to life. The raising of Lazarus of Bethany is a miracle performed by Jesus Christ where Lazarus the beggar died in suffering and was raised from the dead. The narrative occupies a significant and repetitive space in the novel. At his request, Sonya reads out the relevant verses from her Bible to Raskolnikov. Sonya continually exhorts the path of suffering to redemption. The Lazarus narrative is often read into Raskolnikov’s spiritual death and redemption.

In his claim for his reader's total empathy he is a completely new criminal 'hero.' (Dostoevsky has) opened up subconscious wells of darkness within his readers themselves...now there has actually developed a cult of the criminal as hero, not merely in literature, but in art, television and cinema. Dostoevsky's "strong experiences" have left a powerful legacy. (Peace 16)

Dostoyevsky is a narrative master who plucks the strings of his reader's comfort zone, pushing them to stretch the boundaries of their perception and discover the flexibility of their capacity for moral justifications. The structures of right and wrong are flimsy in the face of complexities and it is these complexities of Raskolnikov's character that Dostoyevsky moulds and presents to the reader to disengage them from their context and re-evaluate their understanding. In redeeming Raskolnikov, the author ends the story on a hopeful note highlighting the power of forgiveness and second chances that are possible for him and the reader. Popular culture today is reflective of this legacy. Gradual exposure to a character type creates a schema which holds, like the expectations from a genre, the expectations from a character. Redemption through love is the key and common trope of the publications of Mills & Boon, a widely famous British romance imprint. Anti-hero figures who deliberately indulge in immoral behaviour abound in literature and television series (one can consider *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter* and *You*) and they are not just liked or accepted by the audience but also loved and supported. The moral universe of Dostoyevsky continues to expand.

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Cornucopia

Mrittika Maitra

I've never really liked oranges. Something about the distance between the effort and the gratification. Oranges have been about sticky fingers and lips, too bright winter suns and sitting at the dining table smelling distinctly of chlorine and citrus.

All that is common between then and now is the swivel of my name in my mouth and the orange in my hand. I can't even peel the orange the way I was taught, dust gathered from years of disuse clumping in the sweat of effort and the encouragement of the fruit.

No one is taught to love, we pick it up ourselves; watching and emulating, mimicking what is light and tender. There is nothing tender about peeling an orange. My father taught me to leverage the natural shape and consistency, dig my thumb to rupture a wound and flay the rest bit by bit. Pluck pieces along sinews, squeeze out the seeds. Cripple it.

Then, it seemed like a violent way to wrest flavour.

And yet today, peeling a fruit to feed it to someone else, it feels like love.

Beat Writing: An Exegesis of America's Consumer Culture

Swati Singh

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of the Beat Generation over the consumer culture of 1950s America, America's response to the same, and the emergence of a new counterculture as a result thereof. Its examination of Beat writing reveals that the ostensible rebelliousness in their works is later assimilated by mainstream culture. The paper further traces the large-looming influence of Walt Whitman over Beat writing and scrutinises the co-option of sexuality as a tool for commodification in Allen Ginsberg's poems.

Keywords: Beat generation, beatnik, American consumerism, counterculture, Walt Whitman.

1. Introduction

Contemporary scholars like Stephen Petrus understand the term Beat Generation as a group of post-World War II novelists and poets disappointed with what they viewed to be an excessively repressive, materialistic, and conformist society who sought spiritual regeneration through sensual experiences. This collective of writers, including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, originally met in 1944 in New York City to form the core of this literary movement. It first gained national attention in September 1957. This paper aims to analyse the growing consumer culture of 1950s America with respect to the birth of this new generation of writers known as the Beats. It traces the shifting socio-political American landscape post the Second World War which became conducive to the emergence of this new breed of writers who in turn installed the foreground for the rise of a new counterculture in America. Moreover, the paper scrutinises the influence that Walt Whitman held over the Beats who shared his vision of America, as reflected in their works, alongside the contrast between Whitman's idealistic vision and a consumptive as well as consumed America that the Beats encountered in their writings.

John Clellon Holmes credited Kerouac with coining the phrase, beat, in a conversation the two had in 1948. He wrote that:

[m]ore than mere weariness, [beat] implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness.
(10)

This generation, Kerouac claimed, was a product of the Great Depression and the Second World War. It thus grew up in despair and its members, without a creed and reluctant to categorise themselves, lived with the fear of destructive warfare, as engendered by Cold War paranoia. Kerouac went as far as to reinterpret the crucial term beat, a term for someone down and out, originally borrowed from criminal street jive,¹ as a noun derived from the adjective beatific, a specifically religious term, familiar from such phrases as the beatific vision.² These writers strove towards living the countercultural tendency, thus affirming Barbara Ehrenreich's assertion that these authors presented "the first all-out critique of American consumer culture" (52).

2. Public Response to Popular Culture and Projection of a Counterculture

An article published by *Life* in September 1959 that contrasted the values and habits of middle-class Americans living in Hutchinson, Kansas and bohemians, known as beatniks,³ from Venice, California sparked reactions that exemplified public response to the values and philosophy of what media coverage defined as non-conformists. While the hipster was asocial and emancipated himself from all societal restraint, the beatnik was a new, eccentric figure, pejoratively labelled as such. With their distinctive traits, beatniks proved to be much more intriguing characters than hipsters in the public realm. The article observes that the inhabitants of the two communities from Kansas and California were polar opposites in terms of family life, amenities in the home, recreational activities, physical appearance, and dressing styles:

For recreation, adults in the Kansas town took walks in a park or visited the local grain elevator; children swam in the municipal pool, bowled, went to the movies, or danced at a convention hall. In Venice ‘hip cats’ read poetry in a bathtub outdoors, painted garbage cans, listened to jazz, played bongo drums, drank wine, and discussed art philosophy. The citizens of Hutchinson were neat in appearance and conservative in hair style and dress, and the men wore no facial hair. The beatniks looked unclean physically, their hair disheveled, their shirts untucked, the men bearded. Both groups expressed satisfaction with their lives in their respective communities. (qtd. in Petrus 1-2)

The reaction of the readers to this article was tellingly mixed. *Life* also printed nine letters to the editor regarding the story, containing a variety of provocative responses from people who ruminated on the larger implications of a changing society. While some letters defended and denounced both the Kansans and the beatniks, others hoped for a middle ground between the two lifestyles. Scores of articles on the Beats and their followers, the hipsters and later, the beatniks, quickly fascinated an audience that was not reticent about sharing opinions on broader questions of societal values and mores.

In the post-war period, the vision of freedom which was being offered to Americans was one which continually relegated people to consumption, passivity, and spectatorship. Stuart Ewen epitomises the expectations resulting from the trend of consumerist conformity and the role of advertising in the evolution of American capitalism. In the post-war period, “the consumerized universe was...erected with unprecedented vigor, positing an economic nationalism which signified the inviolate sanctity of the world of goods” (Ewen 206). As consumerist ideology was becoming rampant and critical thought being construed as an anathema to social integrity and national cohesion, non-conformity in any form constituted subversion. The construction of this ideological model required an unquestioning attitude towards the uses of contemporary methods of production and consumption. According to Theodore Adorno⁴, the predominance of means-ends rationalism has promoted technological and

1 In police terminology, a beat is the territory that a police officer is assigned to patrol. Kerouac was keen to steer the definition away from criminality and towards religiosity.

2 Several of the representative Beat writers, like Kerouac, were practising Buddhists and Buddhist ideas and imagery suffused Beat literature. Kerouac’s interest in transcendence had its effect on the word beat. As a Catholic, he went one afternoon to the church of his childhood and suddenly, with tears in his eyes as he experienced the holy silence, had a vision of what the term must really mean, a vision of the word beat as meaning beatific, a sort of holy bliss in Christian theology.

3 The term beatnik surfaced inconspicuously in Herb Caen’s column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1958 and Americans soon began equating the beatniks with the disciples of the Beat generation.

scientific development to such an extent that life has become increasingly totalized as a series of exchange relations in which humans largely serve as means of production and consumption.

The Cold War became conducive to the metanarratives of what Alan Nadel calls the containment culture,⁵ fostering an atmosphere of general tension and exhorting social and consumerist conformity. The reactionary politics of the time, conservatism, McCarthyism,⁶ and the lifestyle of the American middle class involved a desire to escape from socio-economic conditions that the Beats felt resulted in the generation of an increasingly totalitarian and commodity-driven world.

In the eyes of the Beats, the society they faced was massifying and de-individualizing, while...consumer culture appeared to be operating in tandem to require 'conformity' at all times and in all places. (Johnston 107)

It is this conformity advanced by the mainstream consumer culture that the Beats challenged in their writings and in turn found full expression with the emergence of the 1960s counterculture. Described by O'Neil as the "cult of the Pariah...the Beat Generation was a group of masochistic exhibitionists who challenged the values of society, rejected American materialism, and loathed conformity" (115). However, the Beats were not so intent on defining a political or economic position as they were on escaping one. They juxtaposed social awareness with a detachment from the existing society while, at the same time, calling for an immediate release from a culture in which the most freely accessible items seemed restricted to a few. As Gary Snyder points out, the Beats "had little confidence in transforming [society]," and so "never really articulated what [they] wanted" (Snyder and McKenzie 10-11). By its very nature, Beat culture lacked the theoretical and social underpinnings to develop the clarified economic or political oppositional stances that appeared in the 1960s counterculture.

The analogy between capitalism and addiction is a leitmotif in Beat writing; it surfaces in Ginsberg's famous image of the "narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (Ginsberg 11) and in Gary Snyder's description of humanity as "a locust like blight on the planet... living in a kind of addict's dream of affluence, comfort, eternal progress" (39). Kerouac's portrayal of Gary Snyder in *The Dharma Bums* directly attacks a culture he sees as driven by forces urging incessant, unthinking production and consumption. He envisions a rucksack revolution that, in context, appears to have been genuinely prophetic of the counterculture:

a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't

4 See Adorno, Theodor W. "How to Look at Television." *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings*, edited by David Ingram and Julia Simon-Ingram, Paragon House, New York, 1992.

5 Alan Nadel provides a unique analysis of the rise of American postmodernism by viewing it as a breakdown in Cold War cultural narratives of containment. Since these narratives were deployed in films, books, and magazines at a time when American culture was for the first time able to dominate global entertainment and capitalise on global production, containment became one of the most widely disseminated and highly privileged national narratives in history.

6 The Beat movement involved a distinct reaction to reactionary politics, conservatism, and McCarthyism, even while this reaction often lacked the cohesion of a direct political attack on the soft totalitarian system it opposed. Michael Paul Rogin argues that there was no continuity between Populism and McCarthyism and that, even more important, McCarthyism was the product of routine conservative politics.

really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume. (Kerouac 77-78)

Gary Snyder indeed goes far towards raising a viable critique of capitalist culture through his environmentalism and Zen practice while simultaneously addressing some of the problems and contradictions that underlie the Beat reaction to it. Snyder seeks to overturn the Beat distinct between the visionary, as Kerouac imagined him, and commodified existence through a commitment to non-duality, thus sensitising the American psyche to more appreciative, less exploitative social and economic possibilities. William Burroughs is surely accurate when he writes:

There's no doubt that we're living in a freer America as a result of the Beat literary movement, which is an important part of the larger picture of cultural and political change in this country during the last forty years, when a four-letter word couldn't appear on the printed page, and minority rights were ridiculous. (qtd. in Charters xxxi)

3. Co-option and Commodification of Beat Culture by the Mainstream

In an influential essay titled "The White Negro", Norman Mailer described the hipster, a figure whom later writers like Diane Huddleston would link to the Beat Generation. Mailer wrote that the hipster was the product of the meeting of the Negro, bohemian, and juvenile delinquent, but "for practical purposes," the author asserted, the hipster "could be considered a white Negro" (279-280). The hipster, who was asocial and not antisocial, unfettered himself from all societal restraint and declared his nonconformity through partaking in jazz, sex, and marijuana. He "believed that the organization and institutions of our society have, beneath their confection-like façade, killing and senseless muscles" (Burdick 554). Beatniks, with their distinctive traits, proved to be much more intriguing characters than hipsters in the public realm.

As Paul O'Neil observed in his article, "The Only Rebellion Around", the most exhaustive work done by a popular magazine on the topic⁷ between 1957 and 1959, the acceptance of beatnik dissent coincided with the emergence of a fad and cultural protest transformed into a commodity. As Stephen Petrus notes, many entrepreneurs seeking financial gains took advantage of the popularity of the bohemians. Coffee houses, cellar nightclubs, and espresso shops where Beat poetry readings occurred began to sprout in hundreds of cities and college towns all over the country. Jim Morad⁸ pointed out that the coffee house business, prominent only in Greenwich Village at the end of World War II, flourished into a \$5,000,000-a-year enterprise by 1959, and beatnik clothing also turned into a hot commodity. The original beatniks themselves became tourist attractions, with spectators passing a sign which read Gateway to Beatnikland and gawking at the people they saw in the bohemian district of San Francisco's North Beach.

4. Walt Whitman and the Beat Generation

⁷ *Life*, the mass culture periodical with a weekly circulation of 6,500,000, featured and explored beatnik values and disillusionment in this article written by staff advisor Paul O'Neil who was investigating the flip side of the mainstream.

⁸ See Morad, Jim. "The Coffee Houses of America." *Playboy*, July 1959.'

The Beats were deeply influenced and inspired by Walt Whitman, from whom they adopted an idealistic vision of democratic equality, potent artistic honesty, and forthright sexual expression. For Whitman, popular attachment to democracy requires an aesthetic component and thus, he aimed to enact the required reconfiguration of popular sensibility through the depiction of the people as a sublimely poetic, world-making power. This vision of an amative democracy and a united spiritual world invigorated Beat writing.

Following Whitman, they set themselves in opposition to a mainstream culture bent on vapid consumerism and paranoid militarism. In a country where alternative viewpoints were villainized and the lines between real threat and harmless critique were indiscriminately blurred by casting all protests as ‘un-American,’ the Beats rebelled. Unable to directly combat America’s misplaced values, their solution in the 1950s was to drop out of the mainstream, celebrate fringe, and critique the insane status quo with art. (Vogel 391)

Allen Ginsberg in particular clung to Whitman’s vision of a loving democracy. In his poem, “America”, Ginsberg portrays a nation systematically dismantling compassion and sensitivity in favour of fear, militarism, and greed. “America”, therefore, is an elegy for the “lost America of love” (Ginsberg 24) that Whitman had envisioned. Ginsberg’s first full reading of *Howl*, recorded in the winter of 1956 at the Berkeley Town Hall, evoked several titters from the crowd as he earnestly pleaded with America to send eggs to India. The audience also favoured moments when Ginsberg deliberately satirised the Cold War and aimed jokes at the culture of mainstream conformity. Yet, the humour in lines like “It occurs to me that I am America/ I am talking to myself again” (Ginsberg 32) is made bathetic due to the highlighting of the distance between Whitman’s dream and the Beats’ dystopia. In fact, despite their range of forms and styles, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder all wrestled with doubts pertaining to the idealism they inherited from Whitman, and they all reflected the bathetic impulse emerging from America’s failure to manifest Whitman’s dream. It is due to this provocative humour, according to Vogel, that Ginsberg later expressed his ruefulness about obscuring the deeply serious concerns of the poem by playing up the comedic elements.

5. The Commodification and Consumption of Sexuality in Ginsberg’s Poems

Notwithstanding the Beats’ critique of the state of consumerist society, literary works of this period were also caught up in the tide of consumerism themselves. Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* exemplifies the production and consumption of sex and heroism as commodities of American popular culture by absorbing marginalised discourses into the mainstream wherein the figure of the rebel becomes the popular hero. Ginsberg’s projection of the appeal of the transgressor only demonstrates how a marginalised subculture is absorbed into and contained by mainstream ideology:

Ginsberg’s role as a kind of poet-hero is therefore not entirely surprising: not only does it arise out of the dominant culture but its rhetoric of confession stems directly from the demands of that culture. (Selby 68)

For the poet to become a popular hero, he must contain America. Contrastingly, Ginsberg’s desire to contain America ends with his containment by America: “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing. .../... America I used to be a communist when I was a kid. I’m not sorry..../... It occurs to me that I am America” (Ginsberg 31-32).

In Ginsberg's work, Whitman's heroism becomes a model for the rhetoric of production and consumption of the popular, commercial American culture of the 50s. This can be discerned in his poem, "A Supermarket in California", in which Whitman figures as an ambiguous American hero and becomes a poetic commodity consumed by the dominant culture of America. This is reinforced by the concluding lines of the poem that are addressed to Whitman:

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?/ Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry... (Ginsberg 24)

The presence of Walt Whitman in a supermarket, which is a product of America's capitalist endeavour that promotes individual gain at the expense of collective satisfaction, is starkly in contrast with the compelling vision of an aesthetic and amative democracy Whitman had in mind, where he voices the perceived interrelationship between democracy, progress and spirituality and figures the people as inexhaustibly sublime in that they can neither be captured by representation nor finally embodied by political institutions. The deployment of sexuality in Ginsberg's text offers a model for the production of a mass consumer culture in the 50s, for it is here that sexuality is constructed as a commodity of the dominant capitalist system. The commodification of Whitman's sexuality is conspicuous since he is neatly packaged as a gay poet in the lines, "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys" (Ginsberg 23). The figure of the childless father signals his unproductivity when contrasted with the families, made up of husbands, wives, and babies, presented in the first stanza of the poem which are representative of the heterosexual nuclear family that was a fundamental part of the American dream⁹ and the ethos of 20th century America. However, any threat posed by him in lieu of his sexuality is swiftly consumed by the desire to assert his role as a poetic hero presiding over mythical America. In this reading, Ginsberg indeed becomes the conformist rebel by reconfirming the Emersonian myth¹⁰ of the poet as a popular hero.

6. Conclusion

The Beats dreamt of a:

generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitch-hiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly, graceful way... beat, and out but full of intense conviction. (Burdick 553)

The Beat generation was primarily responsible for articulating views of postwar American society that would

9 James Truslow Adams, in his book, *The Epic of America* (1931), stated that the American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (214). Contemporary scholars, however, see the American dream is inherently influenced by capitalist logic, characterised by a desire for a specific kind of material prosperity for socio-economic status, and essentially inaccessible to large swathes of the non-white population and working poor of America.

10 Rather than focusing on poetry as a form, Emerson's poetic theories describe the figure of the ideal poet figure, whose poetry sprung not solely from his own mind, but from mind in connection with the divine, permeating Spirit of the universe. For more information, refer to Emerson's "The Poet."

only reach full expression in the 1960s counterculture. This paper refers to the works of various Beat writers like Ginsberg, Kerouac and Snyder, along with the ideals of Walt Whitman whose vision was shared by many of the Beats to consolidate its argument of an expanding consumer culture that resulted in the consumption of not just Whitman's dreams, but of America as a nation itself.

The Beats frequently invoked the rottenness of Western civilization in their works, which they perceived to be the result of the dehumanisation of modern man due to the pressures for external conformity and a collective refusal to examine the self. Although in the 1950s the Beats muted their specific political positions, their writings helped establish the grounds for an implicit critique of the organized system" (Goodman 170). They were largely responsible for the resultant spread of a sensibility through what became known as the counterculture. The Beat rejection of consumerist aspirations helped open the way for a critical perspective on modernity that still influences those who feel alienated from the dominant culture, explaining why Beat writing continues to resonate with those who react against the era of globalised marketing and encroaching environmental disaster.

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Envy

Devanshi Panda

Green with envy, as the ivy of your never-ending list of pursuers creeps up against my body,
Engulfing me with an emotion so bitter that I choke as the green wraps itself tightly around
my bare neck,

I can't breathe through this forest of hurt, the network of creepers gobbles me up, threatening
to spit me out like useless mulch,

My tears slide down my pale face, forming tiny droplets on the green leaves of stark pain,

My arm reaches out to touch the rose that is you,

It calls to me, like the spindle whorl once did to a naive young lass,

The more I stretch my arms out, the more the ivy pulls me back,

Tiny droplets turn into a heavy waterfall as sadness turns into aggression,

Perhaps I can't see the truth through the veil of hot, angry tears,

For I fight the hedera still,

In the hope that one day, your soft petals will be mine.

Perhaps God lives in the Spaces between the Hollow and the Void

Ruchita Nagar

1.

I walk into the hollow of my shadow—
 an ode to everything consumed
 out of me,
 an echo of all that I have ever consumed.
 As the odes and echoes collide,
 I hear reverberations of emotions
 and find words, familiar and foreign,
 hurting, and embracing.
 The walls of my hollow.
 My heart, however,
 is looking for the sea,
 but is swallowed by the grains of time.
 Beyond these walls,
 the hollow and the shadow flow separately,
 hoping to meet the heart
 far away from the grains of time.

2.

A child lives in my memory
 and a void breathes within her.
 It sings when she encompasses her world in a flower,
 it dances in her dreams
 and sleeps in her laughter.

The child in my memory grows,
 as the void reeks through the crack in her soul
 to hold the other voids living outside.
 And it is when the void dissolves itself
 that the child in my memory
 becomes poetry,
 written for the voids living outside my head.

3.

Maybe to thrive

is to consume
and be consumed in pieces.
To preserve certain parts of our hollows and voids
and let go of the others.
Perhaps the attempt
to find and fill the shadows of our hollows
and the memory of our voids,
in each other,
is the mirror of God
placed inside each of us.

Media Culture: A (Not) Required Impetus for Queer Literature and Art

Priya Jain

Abstract

This essay aims to trace the tangible influence of media culture on the commercialisation and centralisation of queerness in contemporary times. It will showcase how the conservative, heteronormative narrative has denied space to authentic queer realities by commodifying queer protagonists. To this endeavour, it draws upon theorists who analyse gender and sexuality as socially and culturally constructed concepts to examine various media forms, especially Thai BL drama and the Netflix adaptation of *Heartstopper*, that opened up discourse for queer youth to understand the history of their identity in addition to advocating a journey towards self-acceptance.

Keywords: Commercialisation, queerness, cultural identity, inclusivity, media.

1. Introduction

Gayle Rubin once stated:

As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvre, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. (Rubin 143)

Rubin's statement is particularly prescient in a society where the seat of power still lies in heteronormative social formulations and queerness is defined as an extreme other to this idea of normal. However, queerness, as a mode of existence, stands for a fluidity that embraces a spectrum rather than fixed boundaries of demarcation. The term queer in itself was appropriated in its current usage following AIDS activism movements of the 1980s in America because, despite its history of being associated with homophobia and prejudice, some people found in it a possibility of reclamation. As Judith Butler states, "Queer emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity" (Butler 18). The simple fact of being queer became construed as inherently political for, as Tasmin Spargo writes, "Being gay or lesbian was a matter of pride, not of pathology; of resistance, not of self-effacement" (28) and "Coming out suggested emerging from confinement and concealment into the open, a movement from secrecy to public affirmations" (38).

Over the years, media representations of queer literature highlight the dependence of normative heterosexuality on stigmatised homosexuality and has helped problematise the pervasive influence of the dominant culture which indoctrinates people into straight identities and how, or if, one comes to question these parameters eventually. It can be understood with regards to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's idea of the social construction of reality which proposes that people's conception of concepts and identities emerges through the interaction of various individuals and groups within a system of social classes over time. As Butler states "Compulsory heterosexuality is installed in gender through the production of taboos against homosexuality" (qtd. in Spargo 54). It is not our gender identity that influences a certain manner in which we behave; rather, our behavioural patterns forge

an identity that sustains gender norms. This is because the reasons we believe we have an identity are derived from discourses that both produce and police sexuality and gender (Spargo 56-57). It is with this idea in mind that this essay seeks to dissect the politics behind the ethical and cultural stances that depictions of queerness in media culture, arguably the most pervasive and mass-oriented form of culture to exist during contemporary times, engage with.

2. Queer Representation in Thai Media Culture

The stereotyping of queer individuals in substantial parts of Thai media culture has resulted in a fetish culture¹ where queer identities are moulded into consumerist products. This is especially evident in BL/Boy Love dramas.² In the Thai BL industry, queer characters become commodities that are marketed majorly towards heterosexual women. The queer protagonist is hyper-sexualised with a focus on their physical attractiveness— there is a relentless focus on Arthit and Wayo’s cuteness in *Sotus* (2016) and *2 Moons* (2017) respectively, Kongpob from *Sotus* is the prototype of an all rounder protagonist with his intelligence and good looks, and Phana from *2 Moons* is always under the public spotlight, surrounded by his numerous fans. Their identity takes on an erotic connotation because the BL genre is an adaptation of Japanese *yaoi* manga. Mizoguchi Akiko says, “The yaoi phenomena is a female gendered space, since its participants—writers, readers, artists and the majority of editors—are female” (Akiko 65). This shows how media culture is being employed in a manner which conforms to and feeds the fetishization of queer relationships, even as they are depicted through a heteronormative lens, alienating queer voices in the process. Representation attaches itself to power and the invisibility of queer representation from mass media, their “Symbolic Annihilation” (Gross 62-63), highlights the powerlessness of the queer community.

Shows like *Sotus* (2016) use the trope of the gay man chasing his supposedly straight love interest and ultimately fail to portray queer individuals in healthy, communicative relationships. The characters are Arthit, the straight protagonist, and Kongpob, the queer protagonist who falls for him. It is set in an engineering institute where the freshmen have to undergo a hazing process. Arthit is the leader of the hazing group and Kongpob is the rebellious fresher who stands up against the harsh punishments meted out by the hazing seniors. When Kongpob realises he has fallen for his senior, he decides to keep his feelings a secret but keeps his relentless chase ongoing. Ultimately when his feelings are discovered Arthit shuts him out and the junior-senior relationship nearly collapses. However, towards the end of the first season we see Arthit giving in as he says, “I don’t know you well enough, but I want to know more about you” (“Episode 13” 7:24).³

In the second season, Arthit is now a working employee and Kongpob has entered his senior year. In the second half of the show, a co-worker leaks an image of Arthit and Kongpob kissing, which leads Arthit to have a crisis about his sexuality. The couple has been in a relationship for nearly three years but Arthit still shuts out

1 In Marxist philosophy, commodity fetishism presents economic value as inherent to the commodities. It is a form of reification which specifies the dialectical relationship between objective social relations and the subjective apprehension of those relations in a society dominated by commodity production. For more information, see <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/marxism/modules/marxfetishism.html>.

2 BL/Boy Love dramas are Asian productions or modern-day adaptations of *Yaoi* (Japanese term for manga that depicts homoerotic romance between men). It emerged in the 1970s and has continued to gain mainstream popularity. It is even considered an important cultural import of Thailand.

3 The dialogues included in this section have been converted from Thai to English by the author of the paper.

Kongpob who is unaware of the leaked picture and hence, has no idea of the cause for Arthit's panic. Kongpob chases him all the way to his apartment but all communication is refused and even when Kongpob questions Arthit, asking him "Do you still want me to walk by your side?" ("Episode 12" 7:06), he remains silent and the scene ends with both the characters in tears, walking away from each other. Even if this conflict is conquered by the couple, in an episode released in the sequel series, *Our Skyy* (2018), which shows the couple 5-6 years into their relationship, when the prospect of Kongpob going abroad to pursue further education comes up, Arthit clams up, refuses to communicate, and shows up last minute at the airport to wish his lover a hasty goodbye and provide a rushed apology.

2 Moons (2017) portrays a relationship that contains gay men in fixed, heteronormative roles consisting of an effeminate man and his masculine partner and ends up depicting conventionally toxic heterosexual relationships in a queer garb. Phana, who is a second year medical student, is extremely popular as the Campus Moon of the previous year. He fits the tall, lean, and masculine profile of a heteronormative appealing character. However Wayo, a freshman at the same university, stands in stark contrast to Phana. He is short, spectacled and finds it difficult to maintain good grades. Wayo has a crush on Phana, which became his main motivation to enter the same university. However, when the pair meet, Phana keeps calling Wayo a shorty and forces him to work as his servant under the pretext of being his senior. However, Wayo keeps hoping for Phana's reciprocation of his love, only to have that hope destroyed each time.

Wayo goes to great lengths to change himself in order to court Phana's good graces. He completely transforms his physical appearance and maintains a dual personality in his initial interactions with Phana. The introverted, shy and spectacled Wayo gets contact lenses, and participates in the sophomore Campus Moon contest, but in the safety of his room he goes back to his pessimistic and overthinking ways. On the outside, he maintains a rough and out-spoken image as he volleys Phana's teasing remarks with sarcastic retorts. Wayo's obsession with Phana is evinced through the shrine constructed in his room which is dedicated to Phana's photographs and demonstrates his idolization of Phana as the perfect representation of extroverted, confident and heterosexual masculinity.

In spite of the majority of Thai media engaging in such misrepresentations, there are more favourable media representations as well. For example, *Bad Buddy* (2021) follows the story of Pran and Pat. The primary hindrance to their love is not their sexuality but an age-old family feud. The focus of Pran and Pat's love story tackles the struggles queer couples have to face in society and the emotional turmoil an individual undergoes when homophobia is embedded into parental and familial relations. *Bad Buddy* normalises sexualities other than straight and subverts the notion of queerness being the primary obstacle to securing a happy relationship with your partner of choice. This is evinced when Pran questions his mother's resistance to his sexuality by saying, "Is it my job to be responsible for your feelings?" ("Episode 10" 6:24), asserting the fact that all children, including queer children, are individuals with lives and desires beyond their parents' expectations.

Another series, *Until We Meet Again* (2019), provides its viewers with dual timelines and juxtaposes the past life of the protagonists with the contemporary times. The protagonists, Pharm and Dean, try to deal with a flood of memories of their past lives as lovers who died tragically. It interrogates the roots of homophobia and the falsity of any justifications in the face of loss of life. Even when Korn holds a gun in his hand and threatens to pull the trigger, his father insists on him giving up his relationship with Intouch. At this juncture, Intouch's tearful

pleas, “Korn, if you love me, you have to stay with me” (“Episode 11” 5:16), are to no avail. Only after Korn eventually pulls the trigger and Intouch follows soon after do the families realise that their prejudices resulted in the loss of their loved ones. The show constructs characters that occupy the queer spectrum but proves that their queerness does not take precedence over their status as people who deserve love and acceptance from their families. As Dean and Pharm recollect the missing pieces of their tragic lives as Korn and Intouch, the show creates a vision of intergenerational familial trauma. The dead Korn and Intouch were tied together by a red thread in the hopes that a metaphorical one would connect the incarnations of their soul and lead them to each other. This act makes the audience question why the couple was cornered into a position where the afterlife was the only space where they could exist together.

Queer representation in Thai media may have improved over the years but it still manages to endorse certain problematic aspects. For example, in the Thai show *Tonhon Chonlatee* (2020), the audience is shown a gay couple who are allowed to engage in a homosexual relationship only if they agree to have a baby through a surrogate, reinforcing heteronormative ideas of marriage and parenthood. Ton’s father never asks the couple if they are ready for childbearing responsibilities but sets it as a condition that must be fulfilled if the couple aims to continue their relationship. Ton says the child will call him “Dad” while Chon will be called “Mom” which reinforces the idea that a relationship should be constructed out of a husband/father figure and a wife/mother figure (“Episode 10” 5:41). This adherence to the heteronormative convention and maintenance of heterosexual marital boundaries despite being in a homosexual relationship generates an automatic association of a stereotypical queer identity⁴ with a similar fate assigned to anyone who questions being on the spectrum in a strictly heterosexual and patriarchal society.

3. Queer Representation in *Heartstopper* (2022)

The OTT adaptation of the webcomic, *Heartstopper* (2016), by Alice Oseman, has seen representative choices that can be grounded in what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 176), the tendency of popular culture to portray heterosexuality as natural and inevitable and position alternative sexualities as the other. In the webcomic, identities that are usually marginalised in a heteropatriarchal society are provided with a voice. At the centre of the webcomic is Charlie, a gay boy who has been bullied in the past when he was exposed as queer to his middle school mates and has developed an eating disorder and physical appearance issues due to it. The webcomic focuses on Charlie falling for Nick, who realises he may be bisexual and pursues an exploration of his identity alongside his feelings for Charlie. When Charlie automatically loses hope when Nick tells him he likes someone, Nick asks, “You are just gonna assume they are a she?” (Oseman, *Volume One* 242). However, in the OTT adaptation, the audience sees the addition of a new character, Imogen, whose primary function in the narrative seems to be that of a constant reminder for Nick that he is the product of a culture that demands that he conform to heteropatriarchal notions of who he should be. When Nick is internally battling with his feelings about Charlie, Imogen is constantly present for him as the easier heterosexual option to embrace and refuse further questioning.

In the webcomic, what develops slowly as a friendship and later, a love relationship is packed into a single

⁴ For example, a gay couple with one muscular partner and the other partner having a leaner/rounder body, a loud and high-pitched trans character who asks pervasive questions, a straight woman who exposes/poses a threat to the queer couple. These are some common stereotypes employed in queer romances, including the ones mentioned in this essay, like *2 Moons*.

episode in the adaptation, which fails to encapsulate the growth of Charlie and Nick's intimacy and lacks the in the adaptation without the required context for Charlie's behaviour. The persistence of his anxious thoughts is foundations for their eventual love story. What is enumerated in the webcomic as a mental health struggle with darker panels portraying Charlie's depression and anxiety gets reduced to a few random moments of insecurity missing from the adaptation which was a key representation of his mental state in the comic. Another major change that the adaptation has added is the complete change of Nick's friend-group dynamics. In the comic, Sai, Christian and Otis are side characters that start out ignorant but ultimately learn from their mistakes. However, in the show they are nowhere to be seen and Nick shares his friend-circle with Ben and Harry, who have both physically and mentally bullied Charlie. Nick's character is a lot more subdued in the adaptation. Even when Harry throws a ball at Tao's, Charlie's friend, head, Nick does not confront him in an outright manner. However, in the webcomic, when Harry makes a homophobic joke about Charlie, Nick confronts him and says, "You were not joking ... You just saw the perfect opportunity to make someone feel like shit as usual" (Oseman, *Volume Two* 492). Megan Hemsley states in their review of the adaptation:

I found their relationship rushed, lacking, and entirely boring, which was brought about by the adaptation's 50/50 approach; it adapted the side characters but failed to adapt their relationship.

Such media representations by OTT platforms have become the central placeholders for mainstream queer representation and prove that media culture is far from being free from binary prejudice.

4. Conclusion

Media culture has provided both visibility and invisibility to the queer community as this paper proves that the availability of a visible platform does not necessitate a nuanced representation of the subject. In a culture trapped between binaries, the fact of queerness as a spectrum often goes unmentioned, leading to a lack of exploration and questioning, limiting not only the characters but also the audience in the process. It is precisely as Danae Clark states, "They serve a dual function: They avoid alienating gay audiences at the same time that they mask the gay content and retain majority viewers" (Clark 186-201). Media culture has brought the queer moment to an impasse as it blocks the potential for subverting heterosexist norms through a reinscription of heterosexuality and a containment of queerness. The medial turn has given rise to new stereotypes and attributes that have become normalised in mainstream culture and silence queer voices. Hence, media culture in its present consumerist and commodified state is not the required impetus for giving a platform to queer voices.

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Handle with Care

Aaheli Choudhury

TW: sexual abuse, suicide, self-harm

My body- is broken on this red dawn,
Blood marks her knees at thirteen;
 etched on my skin is the curse I bear,
you turn her legs into weapons.

My smile- is a scream for help in this dress,
Sixteen shines in the light of her eyes;
 hands I pushed back are back at it again,
you turn off the lights.

My hands- take the scissors to the lines I've drawn out,
Death grips her neck at eighteen;
 sandpaper to file down the wounds,
you failed to wrap your hands around her.

My eyes- find my image as I peer down the ledge,
Tears mark her cheek at goodbye;

it looks awfully close to the girl on your screen,
you never realized any profit.

My soul- withers today at the crack of dawn,
Twist her wrist so she doesn't leave;
 selling it was just the better option,
you turn her around so the consequences never come

Her world is falling to pieces at twenty,
Love found me in my weakest moments
 she was meant to be bargained for
But

I wasted away, feeding into your fantasy

I wasted away, as you examined my body

I wasted away, in cheap conversations

I wasted away, as my wounds turned septic

I wasted away, as I fell into the rabbit hole

I wasted away, as the earth consumed me whole.

Chetan Bhagat : Problematizing Consumption of Popular Fiction

Navneet Kaur

Abstract

This paper will dissect the works of Chetan Bhagat, with special emphasis on *The Girl in Room 105*, *Half Girlfriend*, *One Indian Girl* and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, to problematize the notion of consumption vis-a-vis popular fiction. Further employing an examination of sexual excess in Bhagat's works as well as a postcolonial critique, this paper seeks to move past the simplistic understanding of consumption as contiguous with popular fiction because it ideologically fits within the framework of capitalism, and shun stereotypes ascribed to popular fiction in the process.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat, consumption, fiction, popular, capitalism.

1. Problematizing Consumption

The notion of consumption is of significance to popular fiction; it gets dismissed from critical discussions by being labelled as a commodity for quick satiation. This biological-literal connotation of consumption in connection to literature stretches back to the times of Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* dismissed an entire set of poets from his Republic on the charge that they wrote poetry which appealed to the reductive desires of humans, like lust, and has contributed to casting popular fiction in a reductive role.

Consumer culture theory¹ understands customer behaviour as part of a complex web of interrelated practices which signify the idea of repetition (Arnould and Thompson 871). Thus, consumer culture theory relies on patterns of consumer practices to derive patterns of consumption. Appropriating this methodology, the reading of popular fiction is used to reduce the consumer's reading activities to a terrain of predictable patterns or formulas. John Cawelti views formulaic literature² as an "artistry of escape" which achieves widespread popularity because it provides security and consolation for the reader—"the tensions, ambiguities and frustrations of ordinary experience are painted over by magic pigments of adventure, romance and mystery" (qtd. in Pawling 10).

The issue when it comes to conflating ideas of consumption—visceral but unstimulating, escapist, repetitive to the point of banality as well as having no literary value of its own outside the socio-cultural reality it caters to and represents—with the emergence and widespread dissemination of popular fiction is that it seeks to simplify what is essentially a very complicated notion. This paper will affirm this complexity. In the subsequent sections, this paper will put forth a stereotype around the consumption of popular fiction and then challenge it by evolving a new meaning of consumption using Bhagat's writings.

1 It is an interdisciplinary field of study which studies consumer behaviour through the lens of the complexity of the socio-cultural context in which consumers exist.

2 Formulaic literature refers to a corpus of literature which is based on fixed frameworks and blueprints. For example, a whodunit will answer the basic question of who committed the crime, usually a murder.

2. Structuralist Analysis of Consumption

Leo Lowenthal says that popular fiction is often considered a symptomatic occurrence. Pawling criticises this claim by saying that “Although Lowenthal claims that he is attaching some importance to the study of popular literature, he reduces it to a ‘symptom’ of social change” (Pawling 9). Hence, it is considered a commodity for ready consumption by readers only to understand the social context of the external world in which it is produced. The act of reading popular fiction gets reduced to mere information-collection. If Chetan Bhagat’s works are viewed in lieu of this notion of popular fiction, then it is the contingent characteristics of the works—like Chetan Bhagat’s Bollywood connections, educational background, net worth, the commodity culture of the twenty-first century, and the marketing ideology behind Bhagat’s bestsellers—that gain importance.

Most of Bhagat’s novels have been adapted into Bollywood movies. Right from *3 Idiots*, *Kai Po Che* to *Half Girlfriend*, his novels have travelled across media and genres. Movie adaptations often help in dissemination of literary works which otherwise might have not been read. However, when it comes to an effective critical study of his works within the paradigm of literary criticism, most critics end up discussing him only as a popular phenomenon who managed to gain some influence in the film industry because he caters to the desires of the masses. Giridhar Jha, while talking about Bhagat, also falls prey to the same tendency of looking at authors writing popular fiction through the lens of production, consumption, sales etc. An excerpt from the article confirms it:

Bhagat’s latest film depicting the tale of a Bihari youth, who wallows in self-pity over his inability to converse in English in his pursuit of love in a metropolis, has done well at the box office in the opening weekend, collecting more than Rs 32 crore despite bad reviews. But it remains an example of how a novel should not be adapted for a feature film. (Jha)

Similarly, noted Hindi writer and Sahitya Akademi Winner Kashinath Singh famously called Bhagat a “bazaru” writer whose literary work “lacked seriousness”:

Writing and passports are two different things and so they should not be linked together. We are committed to creative literary writing which has depth and seriousness. As far as Chetan Bhagat is concerned, he is a bazaru writer. The kind of seriousness required for writing is missing from his work. (qtd. in Kumar)

As Theodor Adorno puts it:

When mass culture exhibits itself it also loves to show how its products are made and how everything in it functions... The products are all the more respectable the more they recommend themselves to the world of information. (82)

However, this paper’s argument contests this notion behind the consumption of popular fiction. Saussurean linguistics³ posits that language is relational and is understood in opposition from other words. Any text—as much as it seems that it has an autonomous existence—is in reality a collection of signifiers referring to other signifiers existing elsewhere. Saussure’s theory, hence, helps in moving away from the high brow-low brow dichotomy because it posits that any text will have elements of both classical and popular fiction⁴ as it will always point to signifiers that exist in other contexts. Bhagat’s fiction also uses clever allusions which can be used to draw inter-

textual connections between his works and other pieces of literature across time periods. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his essay “The Structural Study of Myth”, seeks to employ a structuralist analysis to connect the particular to the universal by drawing parallel connections between the individual myths of the South American tribal community and all other tribal communities of the world. During his analysis he found that all communities had their own version of foundational cultural myths, such as the myth of creation. Subjecting Bhagat’s writings to such concerns of Structuralism⁵ develops a new meaning of consumption, wherein the focus shifts from secondary concerns of information-collection to the literal narrative structure of his writings. A rigorous look at his individual works and then drawing parallels with other fiction works is a way that is being evolved here.

3. Intertextual Analysis of Chetan Bhagat’s Works

The novel, *The Girl in Room 105*, begins with a prologue:

On board IndiGo flight 6E766 HYD–DEL ‘Fasten your seatbelts, please. We are passing through turbulence,’ the flight attendant announced. Eyes shut, I fumbled to find the belt. I couldn’t. (Bhagat 1)

It was Geoffrey Chaucer who introduced the prologue to modern English writing⁶ through his *Canterbury Tales*. In fact, Chaucer was one of the very first writers to have started the tradition of writing in English in a time when the language of the court was French, lending a mass appeal as well as a seminality to his work. When we compare the prologue tradition of Bhagat with Chaucer, what is noticeable is not just the borrowing of this literary device but a thematic similarity by which both Bhagat and Chaucer are placed at the juncture of a crucial break with the past traditions. Within India, the tradition of popular writing in English began with writings of Rushdie, especially *Midnight’s Children*, and Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English August*. Ananya Roy Pratihar affirms this:

It is an undeniable fact that Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) paved a new platform for Indian fiction in English...Indian fiction in English during the 1980s witnessed a new generation of writers who, equipped with a new idiom, strove to assert them and strained to express in their writings their observations summative of human situation in the Indian subcontinent. They liberalised the Indian fiction in English from the complexes which had captivated the early writers and changed its tone, tenor and content. One among these new voices is Upamanyu Chatterjee. (Pratihari 48)

The generation of writers belonging to the time of Bhagat try to break away from the classical literary tradition

3 Saussure suggests that words and their meanings are not natural but created through repeated use and convention. Thus, language is a system that constantly refers to itself.

4 Classical texts are usually considered as ones having a timeless existence and *Iiad*, *Paradise Lost* etc. usually form this corpus while popular texts are those that emerged after the advent of mass printing such as detective fiction or the romance fiction produced by Mills & Boon.

5 A branch of literary theory that developed around the 1950s and 1960s focusing on interlinkages and contrasts between various texts and cultures. It considers a text to be a self contained unit, the meaning of which is derived from the sub-structures, linkages and differentiation between textual referents.

6 Refers to the closing decades of the fourteenth century when English got standardized as a language, moving away from the earlier Celtic dialects and regional variations. For more information, see *The Routledge History of Literature in English* (1998) by Ronald Carter and John McRae.

of Indian writing that focused on mythological themes and strict metric forms. This includes writers like Kalidasa, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, etc. who focused on themes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Bhagat, on the other hand, like Rushdie and Chatterjee is experimental with his themes, forms, etc.

The famous prologue of Chaucer was used by Bhagat as a strategy to arouse interest among readers and provide insight into the tale. Bhagat frames his novel along the same lines where the prologue of his murder-mystery—along with the title, providing the reader with a sense of uncertainty as to the identity of the titular girl—arouses the reader’s interest. The prologue is a conversation between Bhagat and his fellow passenger, Keshav Rajpurohit, in a flight. It culminates in the half-told story of Zara Lone, Keshav’s lover. Bhagat picks up his novel from this ending. Peter Brooks remarks about this special quality of murder mysteries:

Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered: a sujet repeating the fabula, as the detective retraces the tracks of the criminal. (qtd. in Munt 135)

In another murder mystery, *One Arranged Murder*, Bhagat recreates the detective-police nexus which was famous during Agatha Christie’s times. In the novel, Purna Malhotra, Keshav’s wife, is murdered. Even though police inspector Vijendra Singh investigates the murder, the real detectives are Keshav, Purna’s husband and his friend Saurabh. The police are depicted as inept. Agatha Christie’s novels also show the police as incapable, especially in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where it is Hercule Poirot, the detective, who actually solves the mystery. Bhagat also admits to taking inspiration from her:

“I had to learn how to write a good murder mystery,” Bhagat told PTI over a phone call. And, as any good mystery lover, he, too, turned to Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for inspiration. (Gupta)

Thus, what is established here is that Bhagat has intertextually consumed a lot of fiction and incorporated such allusions and connections in his novels.

3. Sexual Excess and Consumption of Chetan Bhagat’s Works

It is to be noted that Bhagat’s fiction has elements of sexual excess. An excerpt from *One Indian Girl* can prove the same:

We were lying tangled up in my bed. He nuzzled the side of my neck. It signalled that he wanted sex. I shrugged my shoulder, dislodging his lips. ‘Radhika, come here,’ he murmured my name in a persuasive voice. ‘No, Neel,’ I said. ‘I am tired.’ (Bhagat 224)

Bhagat’s voluptuous characterisation of love-making as cited here has often been criticised for its exploitative nature and broadcasting of the woman in a position where she is sexually vulnerable. Devrupa Rakshit quotes such degrading remarks used by Chetan Bhagat in *Half Girlfriend*:

To be fair, though, promotion of misogyny and rape culture isn’t new for Bhagat, who is not only notorious for mansplaining feminism to feminists, but is also known to have compared women to chocolate cakes

and racing cars, implying that womenkind's sole function is to provide sexual pleasure to men. "Why should any guy want to be only friends with a girl? It's like agreeing to be near a chocolate cake and never eat it. It's like sitting in a racing car but not driving it," he had written in 2009's *Two States*, which is, interestingly, an autobiographical account.

Any kind of sexual excess in fiction which centralises women in a heterosexual framework generates a certain kind of visual pleasure, identified by Laura Mulvey as scopophilia, which results in the characterisation of the woman as the "objectified-other" (Mulvey 809).

Woman displayed as a sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. (Mulvey 809)

In the movie, *2 States*, the male protagonist Krish remarks about the shorts that Ananya is wearing as being extremely short. The overall structure of the film also has only Ananya as the object of sexual desire; the rest of the female characters are old mothers, which is a strategy to fix the male gaze only onto Ananya. This scopophilia also operates in Chetan Bhagat's novels through an exploitation of the male gaze. The sexual fantasies of the male readers are teased by pressing them into visualising the objectified other and her body through a methodological description of love making:

I opened the top button of her kurti and slid my fingers inside. A voice inside stopped me, I took my hand out. But she continued to kiss me as she unbuttoned the rest of her top. She pulled my fingers towards her again. 'Vidya...' By this time my hand was in places impossible to withdraw from for any guy. So, I went with the flow, feelings, desire, nature or whatever else people called the stuff that evaporated human rationality. (Bhagat, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* 115)

In Lacanian psychoanalytic⁷ terms, Mulvey also explains how scopophilia results in ego formation⁸ for male consumers.

Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its mis-recognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. (Mulvey 807)

Mulvey remarks that these "Peeping Toms" (Mulvey 806) identify themselves with the male protagonist in the movie who appears to them as their ideal ego. A similar process of ego-formation takes place when it comes to Bhagat's fiction; in *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, sexually overt remarks are in abundance. Once a middle aged shopkeeper is seen peeping at Vidya, the female protagonist who is a student:

7 Lacan posits the mirror stage as one wherein the infants mis-recognize their image in the mirror as an ideal ego which they then strive to emulate.

8 For Lacan, ego is not an autonomous subject but an object of conflicting desires. Thus, ego-formation is a process whereby male consumers misinterpret their identification with the fictional male protagonist as an autonomous acquisition of subjectivity.

The middle-aged shopkeeper looked at Vidya through his glasses. She was probably the best looking customer to visit that month. Students who prepared for medical entrance don't exactly wear coloured lip gloss. 'Ahem, excuse me,' I said as the shopkeeper scanned Vidya up and down. (Bhagat, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* 53)

On seeing the shopkeeper peeping, Govind, the male protagonist who loves Vidya, reprimands him for doing so. Among all the male characters vying for Vidya's attention, it is Govind the male consumer will identify with and wish to emulate here as both strive to gain their object of desire. Sexual excess in Bhagat's fiction is, hence, inter-linked with the cross cultural artistic form of cinema and its generation of ego formation.

4. Postcolonial Analysis of Bhagat's Works

John Cawelti argues that:

(T)he mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty and the limitations of the world of our experience. (qtd. in Pawling 10)

Cawelti's argument intends to state that popular fiction only creates an intangible utopia within its narrative, with no materialistic connection with the lived reality of contradictions. Thus, it gets consumed for the escape it provides to its readers. However, a closer examination of Bhagat's works will negate this notion.

Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend* raises the language question⁹ within the territory of India, and links it with the issue of economic development within Indian states:

I didn't know enough English back then to be offended. Also, I was in a hurry. 'You know where it is?' I said instead, looking at his group of friends. They all seemed to be the rich, English types. Another boy, short and fat, seemed to take pity on me and replied, 'Take a left at the corner of the main red building and you'll find a sign for the committee room.' (Bhagat, *Half Girlfriend* 17)

The narrator, Madhav Jha, is self conscious about his Bihari accent owing to the stereotypes around his state and identity¹⁰. As Robert Young points out, "Interest in oppression of the past will always be guided by the relation of that history to the present" (Young 11). The marginalisation of Bihar by the rest of contemporary India becomes an example of how the insidious forces behind colonialism continue to operate in postcolonial India. Madhav

9 Language debates abounded in the post-independence era when the constituent assembly was divided about what language should be adopted for free India. The experiment that was conducted introduced English for a brief period of 15 years and then declared it for indefinite use, with Hindi getting official language status.

10 This stereotype has a mimetic history to itself. During the Sixth Plan (1980-85) Bihar had achieved an annual growth rate of 6.33 percent. This growth rate however deteriorated to come down further to (-) 0.14 percent during the Eighth Plan period 1990-95. As per the census of 2011, the literacy rate of Bihar is 69.83 percent, much lower than other states. This deterioration in economic indices led to marginalisation of Bihar from the discourse of development within India. Taking proficiency in English in a globalised world as a criteria to judge development, Bihar got pushed further to the corner of mainstream Indian discourse. For more information, see <https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/reports/sereport/ser/bihinter/>.

Jha is a victim of cultural segregation at the hands of his classmates on the basis of the fact that they speak the language of the colonial oppressor better than he does.

Bhagat himself agrees that his fiction is situated in the material reality of India:

All my fiction novels are about national issues actually. In *Five Point Someone*, for instance, I didn't intend to write about an issue but luckily I'd touched upon a big issue: education. I thought I should have a condensed version of my take on issues, which is *India Positive*. (qtd. in Sudevan)

Five Point Someone is indeed a movie that talks about issues like suicide prevention, academic pressure in IITs, and the difficulties of navigating a college romance. In a poignant excerpt of the book, the rural community's precarious position of being bound by debt and yet living the dream of sending their wards to IIT is depicted. Alok in the novel talks about poverty at his home:

I looked fully at Alok. "At least you are happy." "Happy?" Alok echoed, "good joke." "Now what happened?" I said. "Nothing. Nothing bloody happens in my life situation. That is why I am never happy. Sister needs to get married, that is the latest I guess." Alok had a point. A miserable home, pointless grades and loser friends was hardly the route to happiness. At least he had the joy of picking dirt out of his nose in the company of his friends. (Bhagat, *Five Point Someone* 176)

Thus, consumption of popular fiction does more than signify escape from the material realm of social and ideological contradictions. It effectively engages with the materiality of a postcolonial reality through issues of race, gender, language and class. Bhagat's narratives have internal contradictions which represent real issues and not just an opportunity for escape. The thematic concerns of his books are not a homogenous territory that is self sufficient to sustain a coherent meaning. In his book, *Five Point Someone: What not to do at IIT*, Bhagat effectively depicts this inconsistency by breaking the myth of an idealised and self-sufficient IIT. In the chapter, "Cooperate to Dominate", the banes of IIT are reflected upon:

The IIT system is unfair because: It suppresses talent and individual spirit. It extracts the best years of one's life from the country's brightest minds. It judges you with a draconian GPA system that destroys relationships. The profs don't care for the students. (Bhagat, *Five Point Someone* 141)

5. Conclusion

The popular fiction of Chetan Bhagat can move past the conventionally labelled meanings of consumption. Subjecting Bhagat's writings to only revenue production analysis, leisure derivation schemas or summary-type reviews is unfair to the entire category of popular fiction. The paper's aim was to use Chetan Bhagat's works as a vantage point for discussing consumption beyond its literal connotation. The arbitrary dismissal of any kind of literature as only being fit for passive consumption without questioning the intricacies of the term is an ungrounded stance. It does not in any way seek to limit the interpretations of the word consumption or the modes of consuming Bhagat's works or any other kind of popular fiction, but posits consumption as a complex phenomenon that has material, tangible and psychological implications.

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within/without

Aakanksha Jha

long before
my parents' parents,
the world stopped being
a real place
and
there was nothing
really left
to say

long before
our parents' parents,
the world was wounded
unchecked,
festering through
yugs and kaals and aeons
oozing pus,
its flesh weeping,
bowing to its destiny—
only a hurt world can face
our injuries

the doctor told me
i'm skinning
myself into rubble
but the man thought duloxetine would fix everything
so what is his word really worth?
and as far as stabilisers go,
there is nothing
to be done
in an earthquake

but wait

even as your stomach turns
its back on itself

