IJTIHAD

VOLUME X

Department of History
Lady Shri Ram College for Women

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Department of History

Lady Shri Ram College for Women
University of Delhi

Volume X

2024

Published in New Delhi by the
Department of History
Lady Shri Ram College for Women
University of Delhi
Lajpat Nagar - IV, New Delhi
110024

To the students and teachers of Gaza, in their memory

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From the Editors - in - Chief

Dear Reader,

It is an honour to present the tenth volume of *Ijtihad*, the annual academic journal of the Department of History of Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi.

It features twelve research papers by undergraduate students. Deciding to not limit ourselves to a specific theme allowed us to feature wide-ranging work on themes like the histories of gender and sexuality with papers on womanhood in the context of Tamil nationalism and motherhood in the context of the Mughal *harem* ; literary histories, with papers on Abul Ahad Azad, Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, Fahmida Riaz and Lal Ded ; histories of film, art and spectacle with papers on Weimar film culture, freak shows and the *Shilpo* and *Shilpi* of Kumartuli ; two papers on the colonial constructions of gender, sexuality and culture ; and work on the histories of conflict and masculinity with a paper on the construction of warrior masculinity of the *Kadathanadu* in northern Kerala and one on the experiences of Indian soldiers in the First World War. We thank all the contributing authors for their imaginative ideas and diligent work through multiple drafts we worked on together.

These papers have been written and edited by undergraduate students and we have only just started our pursuit of academic reading and writing. This, along with word limits, needs to be kept in mind while reading the journal and we apologise for any errors we may have overlooked. The journal uses the Chicago citation format, in the notes and bibliography style throughout.

We would not sufficiently be able to thank our Staff Advisor, Pankaj Sir, in words. His steady guidance, confidence in our work and immense generosity with his time, resources and effort through the past year has been the reason we have been able to do what we have. To get to learn from and work with him outside the classroom has taught us so much about the attention to detail, humility and moral clarity a scholar should embody. We consider ourselves extremely fortunate for having had this opportunity.

A significant achievement for us this year was being able to have the journal entirely peer-reviewed, for the first time in ten years since its first publication. We are so grateful to all the referees we consulted, for sparing their extremely valuable time and effort to help all our contributing authors substantially improve their writing and engage with richer nuances and scholarship relevant to their pieces. We have acknowledged them by name in the journal. We hope the journal is able to not just continue with but improve the review process we have established and consolidate its position as a vibrant and coveted space for students to pursue their areas of interests and publish their scholarship, with formal accreditation.

We would like to appreciate the efforts of all the members of our Editorial Board, who have been an invaluable part of the work we have been able to do, from conceptualising the journal, selecting entries, working with the authors to edit and improve the submissions, and ideating for, organising, and documenting all our events. We hope the last year with *Ijtihad* has been as meaningful for you as it has been for us.

Studying history in a women's college at a public university, we learnt to be deeply reflexive about our work as students in a broader political context where our discipline is being so intentionally delegitimised and defunded, education becoming more inaccessible and the spirit of critique and dissent becoming a value to be defended now, more than ever. This context prompted us to think creatively about how we could respond, as students of history, and we decided to use the journal as a means of making academic reading and writing more accessible to students. Over the past year, we organised five workshops, two guest lectures and six reading circle sessions. We discussed the practical aspects of starting to research and practise academic writing, the intricacies of academic literacy, imaginative methods of historical research and reading archives and discussed various texts across time-space contexts and themes of gender, sexuality, disability, caste, class, religion, violence and resistance, education, and public memory. We have documented these in our annual report, published in this journal.

We are so grateful to everybody who consistently engaged with our work, attended the various events we organised and submitted entries for the journal and the paper presentation competition. We have learnt so much from these exchanges, received valuable feedback and found the strength and inspiration to keep going. They have reminded us that there are always slivers of hope to be found and work to be done as students, regardless of how difficult times may seem. The historian Howard Zinn perhaps put it best when he talked about the importance of remaining hopeful in bad times, when he said *"The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory."*

Lastly, we would like to thank each other for our friendship. It has sustained us since the very first week of college and made the work of being Editors-in-Chief together so easy, fun, and meaningful.

We hope you enjoy reading this volume of *Ijtihad* and continue engaging with our work to encourage the spirit of historical enquiry. We welcome all feedback and have listed the ways to contact us at the end of the journal.

Warm regards,

Jyotika Tomar and Tarini Agarwal

July 2024

Referees Consulted

Dr. Anisha Saxena, State University of New York at Cortland

Dr. Anubhuti Maurya, Shiv Nadar University

Dr. Bindu Menon, Azim Premji University

Dr. Devina Gupta, Jadavpur University

Prof. Govindaswamy Rajagopalan, University of Delhi

Ms. Mitali Mishra, University of Delhi

Dr. Pankaj Jha, University of Delhi

Ms. Priyanka Sharma, University of Delhi

Mr. Ravindra Karnena, University of Delhi

Dr. Ruchika Sharma, University of Delhi

Dr. Shikha Jhingan, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Prof. Smita Sahgal, University of Delhi

Dr. Vijayant Kumar Singh, University of Delhi

Dr. Wafa Hamid, University of Delhi

Annual Report, 2023 - 2024

During the academic year 2023-24, the editorial board of Ijtihad undertook a wide variety of initiatives to encourage scholarly discourse, cultivate a culture of academic reading and writing, familiarise students with the practices of research and stimulate engaging discussions on diverse themes among the student body. These culminated in the organisation of fourteen sessions through the year - six reading circles, five workshops, two guest lectures and the annual paper presentation competition.

Several reading circles were organized by the editorial board of Ijtihad to engage students with critical texts from literature, history, politics, and sociology. The first reading circle discussed 'Three Hundred Ramayanas' by AK Ramanujan, and raised issues of the nuances and regional complexities present within the epic tradition of the Ramayana and the dangers of any authoritative 'claim' on history and memory. The next session was on Prof. Kavita Singh's 'The Museum is National,' which explored the politics of curation, and the contemporary historical and political debates surrounding the impending demolition of the National Museum. A discussion on Frantz Fanon's 'Wretched of the Earth' was organised in collaboration with the Research and Development team of the Department which attempted to understand the experiences of colonialism and resistance, delving into themes of violence, force, and language.

The even semester's events began with a discussion on Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi,' which examined the issues of gender and militarism against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement. As a prelude to the annual academic fest of the History Department, Maazi-o-Mustaqbil, which was organised on the theme of 'Histories of Love, Longing and Desire,' a reading circle was organised to discuss 'Less than Gay: A Citizen Report of Homosexuality in India (1991)' by the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan, the first 'official' publication on homosexuality in India. Through this, there was an attempt to trace the histories of queer lives, resistances, and assertions by turning to archival records and photographs as well. The last reading circle discussed 'On the Poverty of Student Life,' a pamphlet written by students of the University of Strasbourg and the Situationist International in 1966. The attendees looked carefully at archives of student resistance from LSR and universities in India and abroad to discuss the limits and possibilities of academic freedom, student politics, dissent, and freedom.

An introductory workshop on identifying research interests and topics was conducted by Dr. Pankaj Jha, during which students were given an understanding of what research entails and the importance of recognizing gaps within the existing academic discourse to identify specific research interests, reading widely, using sources creatively and the need to delineate a specific area of research within a broad theme of interest. Following this, Dr Jha held a discussion about the usage of primary sources in writing history through an in-depth interactive analysis of Bhagat Singh's 'Why I am an Atheist.' This session attempted to deal with the question of sources, the need to corroborate them with other kinds of evidence and critically understand biases inherent to individual interpretations of historical

texts. The Board also extended invitations to two alumnae of the Ijtihad team and Department of History, Ushni Dasgupta (a Commonwealth Scholar and graduate in Archaeology from University of Cambridge, and a former Editor-in-Chief) and Soumyaseema Mandal (a graduate in History from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and former President and Editor). Over an online webinar, they shared their insights with students on pursuing post-graduate studies abroad in history and related disciplines and addressed issues of profile-building, selecting courses and universities, application processes, scholarships, and funding opportunities.

In the even semester, the Editorial Board and Research and Development team of the Department collaborated with AAINA Education to organize an online workshop on the 'Routes towards Academic Literacy.' This interactive workshop informed students about the social influences that were imbued in the process of reading and learning, addressed various difficulties that young scholars may encounter while doing research for the first time and discussed issues of accessibility in acquiring academic literacy. The last academic workshop was moderated by the Editors-in-Chief and delved into the intricacies of reading, writing, and pursuing history writing with reference to Katherine Antonova's book, 'The Essential Guide to Writing History Essays.'

The first guest lecture was delivered by Dr. Ruchika Sharma from Mata Sundri College, on "Reading Wills, Retrieving 'Native' Women: Concubinage, Race and Law in Early Colonial Bengal,' which drew from her recent monograph on the same. She discussed the complexities of dealing with primary sources, the difficulties in writing historical narratives of women and contested the romanticisation of domesticities which often become spaces of violence and inequities.

The even semester guest lecture was delivered by Jiya Pandya, a PhD candidate in History and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University, on 'Disability History as Postcolonial Concept History' and organised in collaboration with REACH: The Equal Opportunity Cell. They addressed the historiography of disability studies within and beyond the Indian context, the postcolonial adoption of the concept of disability in metaphors of nation-building through societal obsessions with 'normalcy,' highlighted the need to decolonise and de-Brahmanise disability studies and explained 'concept history' as a method of historical analysis.

The annual Maazi-o-Mustaqbil Paper Presentation Competition was organised in April 2024, on the theme 'Histories of Love, Longing and Desire' and a detailed report is included in the section of the journal pertaining to it.

The sessions were consistently and widely attended by students across years and departments and we hope the spirit of historical enquiry continues with renewed fervour with each passing year.

by Avanie Joshi, Ishani Ray, and Jyotika Tomar

Reading Circles

AK Ramanujan's 'Three Hundred Ramayanas'

Kavita Singh's 'The Museum is National'

Frantz Fanon's 'The Wretched of the Earth'

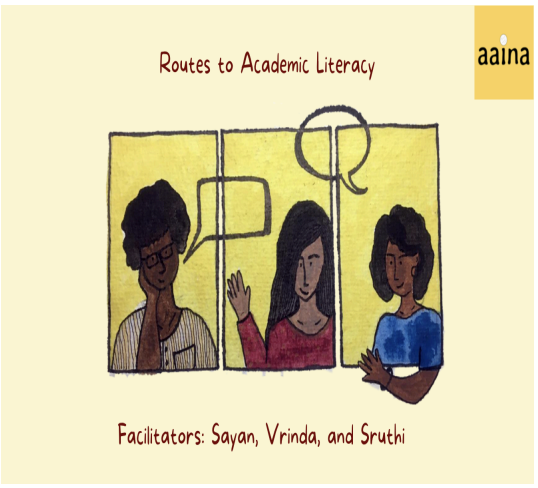
Mahasveta Devi's 'Draupadi'

'Less than Gay' (1991)

'On the Poverty of Student Life' (1966)

Workshops

Dr. Pankaj Jha, on 'How to choose a research topic?' and
'Using and reading sources: A discussion on Bhagat Singh's Why I am an Atheist'



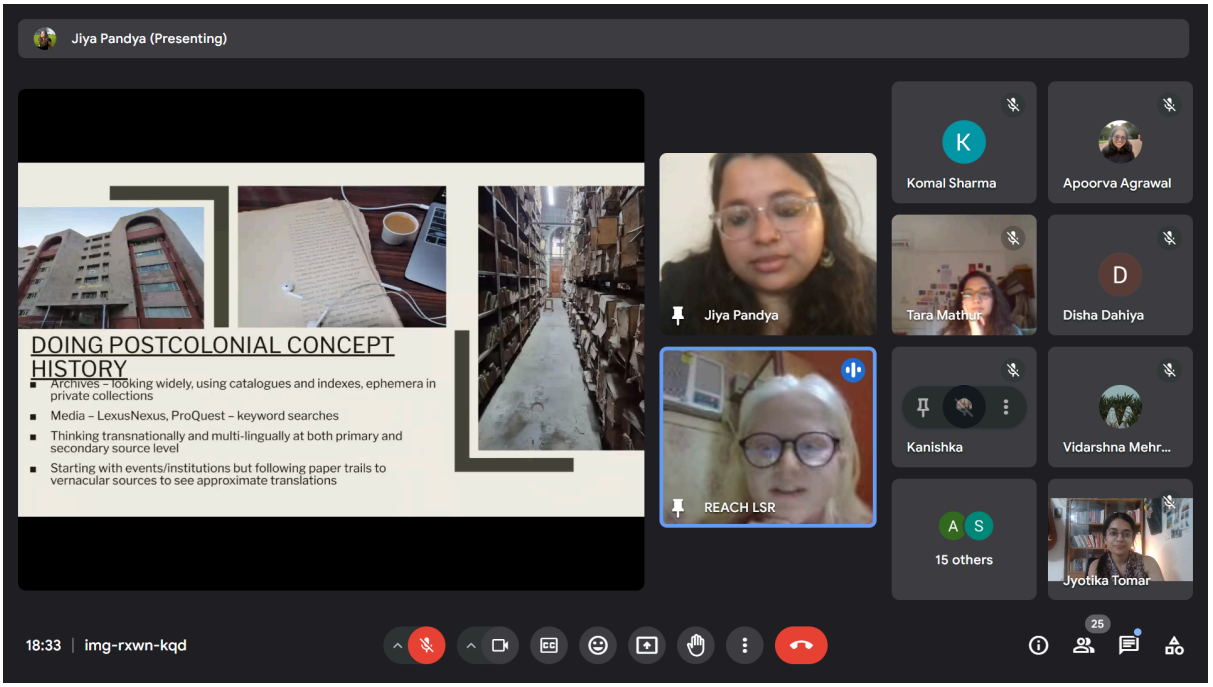
Soumyaseema Mandal and Ushni Dasgupta on
'A guide to postgraduate studies abroad'

Aaina Education on
'Routes towards Academic Literacy'

Jyotika Tomar and Tarini Agarwal on 'Reading, Writing and Doing History:
Using Katherine Antonova's 'The Essential Guide to writing History Essays'

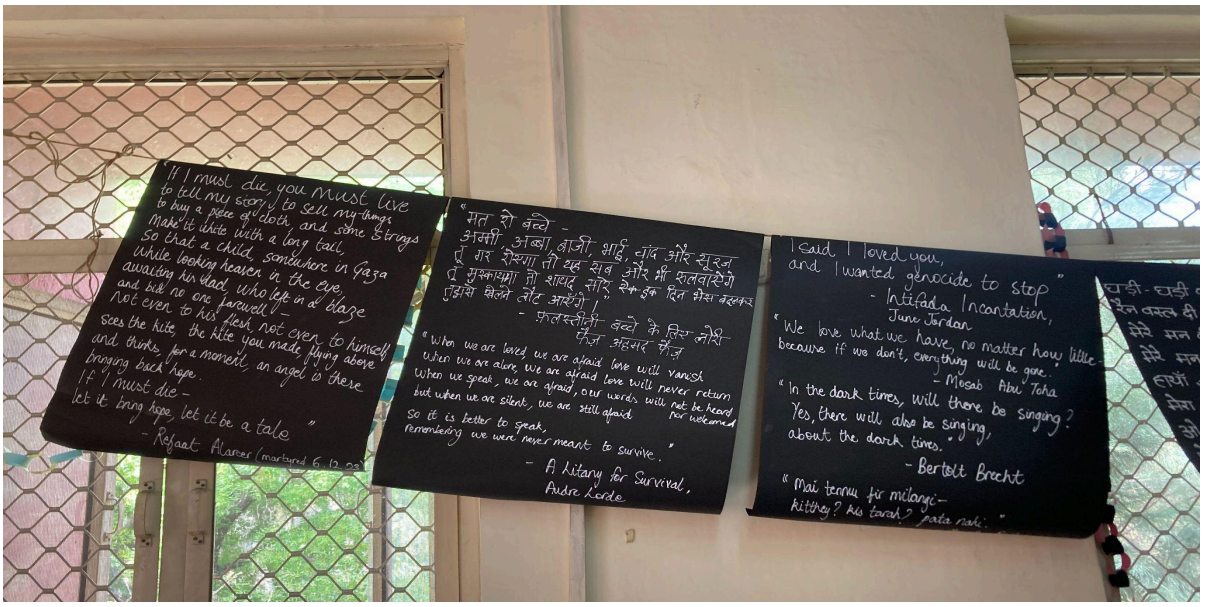
Guest Lectures

Dr. Ruchika Sharma on
'Reading Wills, Retrieving 'Native' Women: Concubinage, Race and Law in early colonial Bengal



Jiya Pandya on 'Disability History as Postcolonial Concept History'

Maazi - o Mustaqbil Paper Presentation Competition



Pattiniyum Parathaiyum (The Wife and the Whore): (Un)Changing Perceptions of Gender and Sexuality through the temporalities of Tamil Literary-Cultural Movements

Sobhana Pramod

Department of BA Programme (History and Sociology)
Miranda House

Abstract

Throughout history, the idea of womanhood has been carefully constructed and cautiously fenced with restrictions. Construed as the custodians of culture in the face of external threats, women and their bodies become spaces for extended discourses on threatened culture. The narratives surrounding gender in Tamil culture can be located in the Tamil Renaissance of the late 19th century and the Tamil nationalist movement of the 20th century. It was in the 20th century that the idea of a great Tamil past was constructed to fit the ideological frame of the present, which required that Tamil womanhood be defined and redefined. The paper will contend that the 20th century, while seeing some progress regarding the position of women, largely constructed an idea of the *Tamizh Penn* (Tamil Woman) that demonstrated a very specific form of patriarchal imagination. By examining ideas of *karpu* (loosely, chastity), *ananku* (dangerous sacred power, typically understood as a sexual force in women), perceptions around education for women through the poems of Bharathidasan and the writings of Self-Respecters, the paper will attempt to explain the narratives around the Tamil womanhood and sexuality as it came to be defined in 20th century Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Tamil womanhood, karpu, Tamil nationalism, women's education, Tamil literary culture

Introduction

On the shores of Marina beach, Chennai, the statue of the great Tamil heroine, Kannagi stands defiantly, holding her *silampu* (anklet) in one hand while the other points directly ahead. Her gait reminds one of the first two lines of the renowned Tamil poet Bharathi's *Modern Woman* (*Pudhumai Penn*), '*Nimirntha Nannadai Nerkonda Paarvai, Nilaththil yaarkum anjaatha nerigalum...,' (translation:* 'her head held high, and looking everyone in the eye, fearless because of her innate integrity.')[1]

Kannagi, along with *Tamiltayy* (lit. Tamil Mother) has been the model around which the idea of Tamil womanhood and femininity was constructed, an archetype of purity and chastity.[2] However, to historically locate the origins of a concentrated effort at building Tamil womanhood, one would have to look beside Kannagi, to the figures of three foreigners, Robert Caldwell, George Pope, and Constantine Beschi (better known as Veerama Munivar). Alongside Thiruvalluvar, Kambar and Avvaiyar, these missionary colonial scholars were commemorated as the noble sons of *Tamiltayy* for contributing to the growth of Tamil.[3]

Caldwell's writings, especially *'A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages'* first published in 1856, established Tamil and the Dravidian language family as independent from Sanskrit in origin.[4] Besci published the first Tamil lexicon and a Tamil-Latin dictionary in addition to several other works in Tamil prose. Pope translated the *Thirukural* and *Tiruvasagam* into English. The influence of these European literary activities on Tamil politics and culture cannot be overstated. It reminded the Tamils of the distinctiveness of their culture and language as set against their perception of North India and the Sanskritic traditions. It also underlined the need to revive the literary traditions of ancient Tamil. The epics *Silapattikaram* appeared in print in 1892 and its sequel, *Manimekalai* in 1898. The Tamil epic, *Silapattikaram*

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[1] Indira Dev Arjun, Santo Datta, and Arjun Dev, *Poems Subramania Bharati* (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1982), 132.

[2] Kannagi is the central character of the Tamil epic Silapattikaram (the Silapattikaram date of composition is generally placed between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE) traditionally attributed to Ilanko Atikal, believed to have been a Jain monk and the brother of a Chera king. The epic tells the story of Kannagi and her husband Kovalan, who betrays her for another woman, Madhavi, a dancer. After Kovalan returns to Kannagi, they travel to Madurai (in the Pandya kingdom) to rebuild their lives, where Kovalan attempts to sell Kannagi's anklet. Falsely accused of theft, Kovalan is unjustly executed, and Kannagi, in her grief and rage, reveals the truth and curses the king and burns down the city of Madurai.

[3] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 189.

[4] R. E. Asher, *The Tamil Renaissance and the Beginnings of the Tamil Novel (*The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1969)*,* 15. ; Karthigesu Sivathamby, "The Politics of a Literary Style," *Social Scientist* (March 1978), 20.

generally accepted to have been composed between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE by Ilanko Atikal, will be discussed throughout the paper. The *Silapattikaram* is one of the most popular and frequently re-told narratives within Tamilakkam, which underscores its enduring cultural significance.

Cultural revivalism set against the background of colonialism, tended to resort to exaggerated panegyrics and hagiographies lionizing an imagined idea of a once great civilisation, now in need of resurrection. In the Tamil context, it can only be called resurrection, since the level of devotion *(Tamil Pattru)* that the *Tamiltayy* commands can be quantified only in a religious frame of reference. The custodians of this culture were women, who were seen as the last refuge of a threatened civilisation. Sumathi Ramaswamy while discussing the feminising of Tamil, points out how certain Tamil leaders painted Tamil women as custodians of the Tamil language by citing a speech delivered by Mylai Ponnuswamy Sivagnanam to an anti-Hindi conference in Madras in 1948, following independence.

> Formerly, when the British empire sought to destroy Tamil by introducing English, men took to its study for jobs and status. At that time when Tamil was neglected and relegated to the kitchen, it was Tamil women who guarded it with their own arms. Now that English rule has come to an end, our women who have hitherto been protecting Tamil are now returning Tamilttáy back to us.[5]

It was accepted that the custodians of the culture must themselves be unblemished, and thus the construction of an ideal Tamil womanhood began. This led to several complex and often contrasting interpretations of ancient texts. These reiterations of classic epics led to the cementing of certain concepts in the conscience of the Tamilian. Abstract concepts like *karpu* and *ananku*, which are near impossible to translate, given the immense cultural significance and complicated literary references, are pivotal to understanding the idea of Tamil womanhood and ideas around femininity. As I hope to demonstrate, these concepts were re-written and entered the cultural consciousness in ways that buttressed emerging ideas regarding womanhood. The *karpu* of Kannagi and Madhavi were portrayed differently as best suited and palatable to the politics of its contemporary times.[6]

The revival of ancient Tamil literature was accompanied by attempts at redefining the Tamil woman as the 'Mother.' This identity seemed to encapsulate all that was necessary for the historical continuity of Tamil culture, as well as to ensure the purity of the progeny of the community.[7] *Karpu*

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[5] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India,* 122.

[6] Prabha Rani, *Kannagi Through the Ages, From the Epic to the Dravidian Movement,* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 124.

[7] C. S. Lakshmi, "Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 25, No. 42/43 (Oct. 20-27, 1990), WS-73

and *ananku* were neatly tied into the mother-metaphor. Thiru Vi Kalnaynasundaranar's *Penin Perumai* (Woman's Pride) was a treatise against the oppression of women, whom he constructed as divine mothers. [8] The idea of the Tamil woman as the 'Mother' was largely derived from this text.

As the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements gained ground, the feminisation of language took on a more political role, and with it ideas around womanhood went through a series of debates on the women's question, with radical new ideas from the Periyarist and social reform movements.[9] The importance of education for women gained primacy. Yet, in the Tamil context as elsewhere in the country, education for women was defined within a gendered paradigm, with its focus on inculcating those virtues, values, and skills in them that will make them better housewives; literacy in women was seen as desirable for a comfortable and happy domestic life.[10] The anti-Hindi agitations brought more women to the forefront of political life than ever before.

The twentieth century, while seeing advancements in women's rights, created numerous contradictions regarding ideas of womanhood. These contradictions were reflected in the attempts of contemporary social reformers to represent an unthreatening Tamil womanhood in keeping with the prevailing social norms, while having to contend with uncomfortable ideas of womanhood as represented in ancient Tami epics, and in the literary-culture of twentieth century Tamil social reformers. The incongruence in reconciling emancipatory calls for women's education with a patriarchal idea of women's education is revealing of the myriad contradictions in the gender politics of twentieth century Tamil Nadu. This paper seeks to locate these contradictions in the politically dynamic twentieth century in Tamil Nadu with a focus on gender politics.

In this paper, I attempt to trace the (un)changing notions of womanhood and femininity in Tamil culture through the 20th century. I analyse certain acclaimed poems and other literary texts produced during this period with a view to explain the ideas of Tamil womanhood and indeed, personhood,

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[8] Thiruvarur Viruttachala Kalyanasundaram (1883-1953), better known as Thiru. Vi. Ka. was an Indian scholar, essayist and activist who championed the Tamil language, and is remembered for both, his analysis of classical Tamil literature and the distinctive style of his prose. His book *Pennin perumai allatu valkait tunai nalam*, was one of the most read books during its period; C. S. Lakshmi, "Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu," WS-74

[9] Erode Venkata Ramaswamy (17 September 1879 – 24 December 1973), widely known as Periyar, was a prominent Indian activist, politician and social reformer. He formed the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, which emerged as a potent force challenging social norms and advocating for the rights of non-Brahmin communities in South India, promoting rational thinking, eliminating caste-based discrimination and uplifting women. He is called the Father of the Dravidian Movement and his principles remain an important factor influencing contemporary politics in Tamil Nadu.

[10] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist,* Vol. 16, No. 4 (Nov., 1989), 629

in Tamil literary compositions. I will also undertake a survey of the relevant secondary literature for the same purpose.

The paper contends that this century was marked simultaneously by progressive and radical steps regarding the position of women, as well as by a patriarchal construction of a powerful idea of the *Tamizh Penn* (Tamil Woman), wedged firmly in the bedrock of 'cultural preservation.' The role expectations of women, and the ideas of femininity contrived by the contemporary male writers and scholars, gestures to a cultural mystification of the past by a privileged minority to invent a retrospective justification for the present role of the ruling classes.[11] The mystique created around the ideas of *motherhood*, *karpu* and *ananku*, and the deification of womanhood only served to reinforce gendered norms altered to be more palatable for the 'progressive' twentieth century tastes.

Karpu and Ananku: Kannagi's Ananku and Madhavi's Karpu

A study of womanhood in the Tamil context would be incomplete without a sound analysis of the twin concepts of *karpu* and *ananku,* both important cultural signifiers for the Tamils. While *karpu* has been loosely translated as chastity, purity or virginity referring particularly to a woman, the term *ananku* has more complex underpinnings and a debate raged on the exact meaning of the term. In popular understanding, *ananku* seems to signify the sexual power that 'clings' to a woman, especially in her breasts and in a lesser quantity in her sexual organs, as explained by George Hart in an influential essay.[12] However, V. S. Rajam noted that *ananku* in ancient Tamil literature was used across a broad range of contexts, not always attestable to the popular conception of 'a dangerous sexual power in a woman.'[13] This debate remains out of the scope of the present paper, but certain relevant arguments about the *ananku* of Kannagi from both Hart and Rajam's papers will be discussed in this section.

Karpu or chastity, often construed as a concept of Brahmanical patriarchy has a Dravidian origin. Indeed, the *Tolkapiyyam* has a section called *Karpiyal*, or '*The Grammar of Chastity."*[14] The

[11] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* (London: Penguin Books,2008), 11.

[12] George L. Hart, "Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnadu," in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, ed. Kumkum Roy and B. D. Chattopadhyaya (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2023), p. 235.

[13] V. S. Rajam, "Ananku: A Notion Semantically Reduced to Signify Female Sacred Power," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1986)

[14] The Tolkapiyyam is an ancient Tamil grammar text. Authorship of the Tolkapiyyam is uncertain, although it is traditionally attributed to Tolkappiyar, a disciple of the sage Agastya. It is generally agreed that the Tolkapiyyam was written over time, with the oldest sections dating back to the 2nd century BCE and the final redaction appearing around the 5th century CE. It focuses on Tamil grammar (*ilakkanam*) across three books (*atikaram*): the Eluttatikaram, the Sollatikaram and the Porultikaram. The section of Karpiyal comes under the Porultikaram; Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Tragic

assertion that the more sexually attractive a woman is, more power is endowed on her by her *karpu*, makes it comparable to *ananku,* which is often (not always) used in reference to the sexual appeal of a woman's body. The woman's *ananku*, if contained within the paradigm of the chaste wife, could be auspicious, making her a *sumangali*, literally "the auspicious one". But, outside the marital status, whether as a virgin or as a widow, the *ananku* was a deadly and destructive power."[15]

It is in this context that Hart constructed Kannagi's burning of Madurai as an expression of her uncontrollable *ananku* after the death of her husband, which unleashed the *ananku* stored in her breasts (which she flung at the city).[16] Whether this 'power' of Kannagi should be construed as *ananku* is debatable. Yet, the difference in the approaches of Hart and Brenda Beck is significant pointing to the fact that the story lends itself to varied appropriations. Hart suggested that the *ananku* spun out of Kannagi's control after Kovalan's death. Beck on the other hand placed the burning of Madurai as a consequence of a wilful act by Kannagi using the power of her chastity, thus highlighting the agency of Kannagi. This differential approach is relevant to my study.[17] A story that exemplified female rage in the face of injustice was variously constructed as a 'dangerous, divine power' that must be controlled through marriage or death. Therein lay the construction of 'modern' ideas around female sexuality and rage in Tamil culture.

While Kannagi's *karpu* was discussed at length in multiple studies, an understanding of Madhavi's *karpu* seems essential. In the original epic, Ilanko Atikal portrayed Madhavi as a woman of virtue who refuses to take another lover after Kovalan, and stays true to him.[18] Ilanko uses the love and fidelity of Madhavi to represent *karpu* as not just the exclusive preserve of wives.[19] However, as Prabha Rani demonstrates in her study of the evolution of the Kannagi figure through Tamil history, in later iterations of *Silapathikaram*, the character loses the nuance offered by Ilanko and becomes a mono-dimensional typecast of a sex worker.[20] This deliberate change must be

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Widows or Cunning Witches? Reflections on the Representations of Women in Tamil Myths and Legends," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 12 (Mar. 21 - 27, 2009), 58.

[15] Ramaswamy, *Tragic Widows or Cunning Witches? Reflections on the Representations of Women in Tamil Myths and Legends*, 59.

[16] George L. Hart, "Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnadu," 241.

[17] V. S. Rajam, "Ananku: A Notion Semantically Reduced to Signify Female Sacred Power," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* Vol. 106, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1986), 262.

[18] Rani, *Kannagi Through the Ages,* 121.

[19] Rani, *Kannagi Through the Ages,* 121.

[20] Rani, *Kannagi Through the Ages,* 121.

contextualised within the politics of the time, in the light of both the social reform movements, and the efforts at reviving and glorifying a lost civilisation, once grand and powerful. When the ideas around Tamil womanhood were emerging, it was essential to disparage 'the Madhavi character,' whose sexuality was seen as dangerous and glorify the 'Kannagi figure' whose chastity and willingness to forgive marital betrayal without protest was seen as most acceptable. Thus, in this dichotomy of dividing Kannagi and Madhavi as acceptable and unacceptable women, far removed from the nuances of the original epic, one finds the *Pattini* versus the *Parattai* phenomenon.

The *Pattini* versus the *Parattai* phenomenon in Tamil culture can be understood as 'the Wife versus the Whore' narrative. Kannagi portrayed as the archetype of purity and chastity, represents the acceptable face of Tamil womanhood, as the *Pattini* (wife) while Madhavi is reduced to an impure and inacceptable one-dimensional character in reinterpretations, as the *Parattai* (Whore). This shift in the characterisation of Kannagi reflects the societal effort to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable ideas of womanhood, creating a strict dichotomy between the chaste wife and the fallen woman.

Periyar in an essay on chastity, published in *Kudiarasu* in 1928, questioned the logic of applying the concept of *karpu* as a virtue to women alone, and endorsed *karpu* as a yardstick for judgment for men as well.[21] The Self-Respect movement radically questioned gender norms in the society. However, how far the movement in itself was emancipatory for women is contestable. In fact, within the delimited electoral ground that the later Dravidian parties worked in, it even led to regressive ideas on gender.[22]

Ideas of *karpu* are inextricably tied in with discussions on the Devadasi System. Yellama (also called Renuka) is a goddess worshipped among the devadasi community of Andhra Pradesh.[23] Myths regarding Yellamma or Renuka Amman are varied, but one particular story is remarkable for its reference to *karpu*, or chastity. Renuka was said to be so chaste that she could fill water in unbaked mud pots. However, a moment's lapse causes her to lose that ability, after she had adulterous thoughts after witnessing a King make love to his wives on a river bank. Other versions of the story with slight variations all point to her losing her chastity after having an impure thought.[24] Probing

[21] Periyar, *Why were Women Enslaved (Penn Yaen Adimai Aanaal?).* Translated by Meena Kandasamy, (Chennai: The Periyar Self Respect Propaganda Institution, 2019), 1-5.

[22] C. S. Lakshmi, *Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu,* WS-73

[23] Kamal K. Misra and K. Koteswara Rao, "Theogamy in Rural India: Socio-Cultural Dimensions of the "Jogini" System in Andhra Pradesh," *Indian Anthropologist,* Vol. 32, No. 1/2 (Jan-Dec. 2002), 5.

[24] Ülo Valk, *Caste Divisions in the Religious Folklore of Tamil Nadu, Anthropos*, 2010, Bd. 105, H. 1. (2010), 207.

into the worship of Renuka Amman/Devi by the devadasi community of Andhra Pradesh, especially focusing on the question of chastity (the worship of a once chaste, then 'fallen' woman) and how it is perceived by the women of the devadasi community would invite further research into new dynamics in this field of study.

Education for Women and Comparing the Twin Poems: Kudumba Vilakku and Irundha Veedu

During the colonial period, education for women was viewed with fear and suspicion all over the country. One reason was the anxiety over possible conversion due to the activities of Christian missionaries who offered western education to women. The other was the unease surrounding a change in the gender roles: what would women become capable of once educated? Yet education for women was quickly becoming the mark of civilisation especially within the middle-classes.

In her study of how education for women was perceived among Hindu middle-classes of Uttar Pradesh in the late-nineteenth and early- twentieth centuries, with education being supported publicly but opposed privately, Charu Gupta wrote,

> Education for women was a moral imperative for a middle-class Hindu identity and civilisation, and a national investment to domesticate the woman and assign to her a more enlightened and companionable role in marriage.
>
> ...Bishan Narayan Dar, a famous lawyer of Uttar Pradesh, said, "With female education will come not only domestic peace and harmony, but a new source of pleasures, pleasures which men derive from female society will be opened, ennobled and purified, and feminine tenderness and sympathy, under the guidance of enlightened reason, will become one of the most potent instruments of social amelioration."[25]

Interestingly, this quote from a lawyer in Uttar Pradesh in 1916, succinctly reflects the sentiments echoed in the South regarding women's education. In *Pennin Perumai*, Thiru Vi Ka places the two values of chastity and service as the motto of an educated woman. Education was to make women more amenable, attractive, and efficient at their already existing and ordered gender roles.[26] Bharathidasan in his poems, paints contrasting pictures about the benefit of having an educated housewife. Yet, as G. Balakrishnan, in the foreword to the translation of the poems into English in

[25] Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 166.

[26] C. S. Lakshmi, "Tradition and Modernity of Tamil Women Writers," *Social Scientist,* Vol. 4, No. 9 (Apr., 1976), 39-40.

2005, clarifies that the poem refers to a 'homemaker and not a housewife'.[27] This choice of words possibly reflects contemporary views on the implications of a gendered vocabulary.

The twin poems, *Kudumba Vilakku* (Family Light/Lamp) and *Irundha Veedu* (Dark House), written by Tamil poet Bharathidasan, serve as good examples for an analysis of the ideas around education for women, or "education for serviceability."[28] Born K. Subburathinam (1891 – 1964), the poet was deeply influenced by Subramania Bharathi and renamed himself Bharathidasan, follower of Bharathi. Bharathidasan was a staunch adherent of the Dravidian movement and virtually a spokesperson for the Dravidian movement, who wrote in simple and chaste Tamil to reach the masses through his poems about the ills of casteism, illiteracy, superstition, and male chauvinism.[29]

In *Kudumba Vilakku*, translated as 'A Luminous Home,' the wife is educated. The qualities of an educated woman are thus illustrated– she gets up early in the morning, wakes her children and husband, helps them get ready for their day, is a good host to her in-laws and a joyful and helpful companion to her husband. In *Irundha Veedu*, translated as 'A Dismal House,' the Wife is illiterate, unhelpful, lazy and towards the end of the poem, even dull-witted.

A comparison of the two poems can start with an observation of their titles, while the original Tamil titles are straightforward with the reference to light and darkness, the translated titles offer an interesting contrast– home and house, and an educated wife that makes the difference. The educated wife is described as slender-waisted, have fish-like eyes and tiny lily bud fingers while the illiterate wife is described as resembling a worm, a chimpanzee, and a porcupine.[30] While the educated wife has a melodious voice and sings in chaste Tamil the singing of the illiterate woman is compared to a goat bleating.[31] Such examples can be cited in plethora from the lengthy poems, but these examples serve well to illustrate the point of the poet. Education was portrayed as necessary for a woman for domestic bliss, in some ways the poem seems to suggest that educated women were physically more attractive than uneducated women. Turning the argument that educated women are a threat to the

[27] M. S. Venkatachalam, *A Luminous Home and a Dismal House, Kudumba Vilakku and Irundha Veedu*, (Chennai: Bharathidasan University, 2006), 9.

[28] C. S. Lakshmi, "*Tradition and Modernity of Tamil Women Writers,"* 39-40.

[29] Venkatachalam, *A Luminous Home and a Dismal House,* 11-12.

[30] Venkatachalam, *A Luminous Home and a Dismal House,* 11-19, 71-73.

[31]Venkatachalam, *A Luminous Home and a Dismal House,* 17, 77.

society, these poems suggest that an uneducated woman is a danger to the family, as *Irundha Veedu* ends with a death due to the illiteracy of the wife.

Yet, women's education for the sake of education was also propagated by women from within the Self-Respect movement itself.

> Unlike most social reformists of the time, Self-Respecters did not expect women to use their education to run the home and raise good children. ... She envisions a socialist society as one in which all work is shared and there is no artificial division between "men's work" and "women's work.[32]

Though the writings of women Self-Respecters are also varied on the exact role that education for women should play in social life, one can discern two distinct schools of thought: one that advocated education for women to prepare them for domestic life (or domestic delight), and the other that preached education for the sake of progress and participation in the Self-Respect movement. [33]

Conclusion

The 20th century retellings of *Silapattikaram* offer an important lens through which one can examine the contested ideals of womanhood in Tamil Nadu. The re-telling of Kannagi and Madhavi's stories often reveal a tendency to contain female characters within socially acceptable limits, reflecting the ideas surrounding gender norms in Tamil cultural narratives. The idea of a Tamil woman remains in flux, even as it evolved through the complex literary-cultural discourses of the 20th century in Tamil Nadu, it remains suspended in constant change through various interpretations in Tamil literature, culture, and cinema well into the 21st century.

Ancient Tamil literature was largely egalitarian, as seen with the Sangam poet Avvaiyar who being from a 'lower' caste dined with a king. Vijaya Ramaswamy cites such instances of social egalitarianism to suggest that the status of women (and their representation in the literature of the period) must be contextualised in a social fabric where gender and caste inequalities were yet to become as prominent as they became after the entry of Brahminical culture in the late Sangam period. Ramaswamy writes that early Tamil women were both visible and celebrated in the anthologies of the Sangam age, which have significant contributions by women.[34] The uniqueness

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[32] K. Srilata, ed., *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self Respect History,* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), Introduction.

[33] Venkatachalam, *A Luminous Home and a Dismal House,* 9. ; K. Srilata, ed., *The Other Half of the Coconut*, 43.

[34] Vijaya Ramaswamy, "From 'Amazonian' Warrior to Submissive Wife: The Taming of Alli," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol.41, Issue No. 17 (April 2006), 1662.

of the Tamil experience of the politically dynamic 20th century was the attempt of the contemporary social reformers in representing women from the ancient period in keeping with prevailing patriarchal norms of the time. They had to contend with uncomfortable questions about Madhavi's chastity and Kannagi's loyalty to Kovalan who betrayed her. The self-avowed rationalist Tamil movement of the 20th century (as represented by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) did not dismiss but rather embraced the religious theme of chastity as symbolised by Kannagi. It is in this context that the patriarchal norms can be contrasted with the emancipatory rhetoric popular at the time.[35] The calls for education for women was co-opted and morphed into serving the needs of a specific idea of gender roles in Tamil Nadu. This fits into the larger phenomenon of complex interactions and confrontations with gender in Tamil society.

The selective celebration of certain ideas of Tamil-ness is not unique to the Kannagi/Tamil womanhood narrative, as several aspects of ancient Tamil culture were carefully dismissed as unsuitable or elevated as quintessential to Tamil culture based on contemporary social norms and accepted ideals of Tamil nationalism. Therefore, one can locate the attempt of 20th century social reformers to re-define the Kannagi story among the larger efforts at the creation of a Tamil culture that was to be inherited by the present, by selectively picking, discarding, and re-working different aspects of an ancient society.

As discussed in the paper, literature and the re-interpretation of ancient texts became an arena for presenting the contested ideals of Tamil womanhood. The 20th century in Tamil Nadu, while seeing progress in women's rights, also witnessed the construction of a patriarchal ideal of Tamil womanhood that was tied to 'cultural preservation'. Thus, the literary-cultural narratives of this period, which were often presented as celebrations of Tamil womanhood served to reinforce traditional gender roles within a changing society, through the construction and glorification of a socially acceptable idea of an emancipated woman. To end with Roland Barthes' discussion on motherhood and emancipation, in his essay "Novels and Children" would be fitting.

> Women, be therefore courageous, free; play at being men, write like them; but never get far from them; live under their gaze, compensate for your books by your children; enjoy a free rein for a while, but quickly come back to your condition. One novel, one child, a little feminism, a little connubiality.
>
> ... Write, if you want to, we women shall all be very proud of it; but do not forget on the other hand to produce children, for that is your destiny.[36]

[35] Prabha Rani, *Kannagi Through the Ages*, 8.

[36] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Random House, 1993), 50-52.

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Understanding the Idea of Mughal Motherhood: An Investigation into the Emotional, Material, and Political Realities of a Mother in the Mughal Harem

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Abstract

The *harem* has long been sexualised, eroticised, and spoken of with little historicity by European travellers and historians alike. This paper stands as a critique of the same and raises questions about the role of a particular category of women in the harem – mothers. The central focus of this paper is to reconceptualize the idea of motherhood in the Mughal harem - not as mere wombs for producing children but as vessels of wisdom and power. The paper attempts to show how motherhood for women brought an increase in authority, influence, and a new set of dynamic responsibilities. Senior women at the time were sought out for their political wisdom, familial diplomacy, and strategic advice, and had responsibilities to fulfil. This paper will raise questions about what it meant to be a mother, what power they possessed, and the different nuances that exist within the category of mother itself. I will also attempt to understand the material advantages that could come with being an important member of the harem in terms of their salaries, commercial undertakings, and trading pursuits. This paper attempts to show that mothers as a class of women were not completely removed from court politics and went on to lead consequential and important lives, even when limited within an institutionalized harem.

Keywords: queen-mother, Mughal, harem, gender, hierarchy

"...although Akbar's harem was secluded, sacred, and even inaccessible to most people, it was by no means closed off from the world, unconcerned with politics, or interest in public affairs."

- Ruby Lal, *Historicising the Harem*

Introduction

This essay is an investigation into the political, emotional, and material realities of mothers in the Mughal world. It hopes to achieve two primary goals. First, to distance the harem and its women from primary connotations of lust, jealousy, and competition, and instead visualise them as occupying a complex multidimensional space of overlapping authority, hierarchical power, kinship relations, and emotional ties. Second, to investigate what it meant to be a mother within this space. The study is not to put women into a binary mould of either a sexualised object or a serene mother, but to revisualise the latter and investigate the multifaceted role mothers played throughout their lives, especially as seniors. The aim is to see mothers not merely as a vessel for producing and rearing children, which would be a disservice to these women and ignorance of the quality of mentions we find in the chronicles. Instead, the paper endeavours to understand their place as players in the ground of politics from the virtue of them being mothers. The study stands in direct critique of the man-public-political and women-private-apolitical dichotomy. The essay will go on to show how motherhood created a space for these women to be engaged in politics and public affairs.

Defining 'Mothers' and 'Motherhood'

Before moving forward, it is important to clarify the deceivingly simple word – 'mother' within the Mughal world. This essay uses 'mothers' for all women who either gave birth to a child of the crown, or foster mothers who took care of the child while growing up. The category of foster mothers is also a weighted one. The first kind of milk motherhood where services of an appointed wet nurse or nurses were engaged for royal infant suckling, accompanied by subsequent child-rearing. The second kind was that of institutionalised adoptive motherhood where elite Mughal women took upon themselves the charge of a royal child and were responsible for their upbringing, for example, when Ruqayya Sultan Begum took charge of Prince Khurram.[1] According to Sehar Khawaja, "the deeply entrenched phenomenon of alternative maternal nursing and/or foster tutelage in Mughal social structures created a dual identity of motherhood in pre-modern India i.e. birth mother and foster mother."[2] The works of Rajoshree Ghosh and Balkrishan Shivram have shown how foster relationships were equally or sometimes even more important and intimate than biological ones.

[1] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, trans. A. Rogers (London : Royal Asiatic Society, 1909-1914), 48.

[2] Sehar Khawaja, "Fosterage and Motherhood in the Mughal Harem," *Social Scientist* 46, No. 5-6 (May-June 2018), 42.

Jahangir, for example, mentioned his love for his foster mother[3] and even asserted that he did not have so much affection for his own mother, as he had for her.[4]

Many senior women like mothers, aunts, and sisters of the emperor must have acted as mother figures to young children who had grown up under their supervision and care in the harem, who later mentioned them as revered figures in their chronicles. Ruqayya Begum, for instance, was the foster mother of Prince Khurram. These women often found mention as revered figures in court chronicles.

Even though motherhood occasioned an initiation into an avenue of seniority and power, other contingencies were at play too. Of these, age and experience were the most crucial along with one's kinship status and the future of their progeny. A senior member of the harem and potentially the mother of the current emperor would exercise more power than any new mother of a prince ever could. This becomes evident in how the women are named and remembered within the chronicles. The *Jahangirnama* mentions that Shah Shaja'at, Roshanara Begum, and Aurangzeb "came from the womb of the daughter of Asaf Khan." The chronicle fails to even name Arjumand Begum, the daughter of Asaf Khan and wife or Shah Jahan who birthed these royal children.[5] It is only when these mothers attain a certain age and experience over the younger generation, are they referred to by their titles and exercise considerable power over the king. Thus, although the possibility of being the mother to the heir provided a distinguishing place to women, new dimensions to their roles were only added over time.

The Importance and Role of Mothers within the Mughal Household

The importance of mothers within the Mughal world can be realised in numerous ways. Amongst the dearth of references to women in court chronicles, mothers who bore children for the monarchy found mention. Babur's memoir, which rarely mentions women, still manages to name a few like Isan Dawlat Begum who "was central in keeping alive the lines of the Khans".[6] The *Akbarnama* lists the names of women who suckled infant Akbar.[7] Jahangir also frequently mentions his mother the "revered" Maryam-uz-Zamani (also chief consort and principal Hindu wife of Akbar) and his foster mothers under whose guardianship and care he had spent his childhood.[8] Babur in his memoir,

[3] The name is not provided, instead the reference is made by – 'mother of Qutb-ud-din Khan Koka'.

[4] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 78.

[5] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 328.

[6] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84.

[7] Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, trans. H. Beveridge (Calcutta: Arunima Printing Works, 2000), 130-31.

[8] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 78.

mentions important women of the realm and remarks that concubines and mistresses who did not produce kids were of "no consequence".[9]

Connections can be made to the Ottoman court where, Lisa Balabanlilar notes that, "a woman's access to power became removed from her lineage, being instead inextricably linked to the birth of a male heir and the onset of post-reproductive years."[10] Leslie Pierce mentions how "women without sons were women without households and therefore women of no status."[11] Thus, as is evident, the very quality of mothering a son whether foster or biological, made one more important and distinguishable in the harem than other women.

Although the fact that mothers were mentioned in the chronicles indicate that they were shareholders within the arena of power, it is important to critically analyse these mentions in order to understand their role. The references record Mughal Emperors looking to their mother figures for help and seeking their suggestions on public matters. Humayun Nam references Kamran who consulted Khanzadeh Begum and Dildar Begum in political matters.[12] In his 1580s account of Akbar's court, Father Monserrate records that Akbar's mother, Hamideh Banu Begum, acted as the head of the province of Delhi when he marched to Kabul in the late 1570s.[13] When the relations between Prince Salim and Akbar soured after the former's assassination of Abu'l Fazl, the senior mothers- Maryam Makhani, Hamideh Banu, and Gulbadan Begum pleaded for Akbar's forgiveness on behalf of Salimband renewed their relationship.[14]

Thus, it is apparent that mothers of the monarchy were prized within the institution. They were sought out for their political advice and wisdom. These women went on to have a long-lasting impact on the crown. Although experience was a factor, the last example shows that they influence in mending and maintaining kinship relations. Hence, imperial women in their prescribed role of mothers commanded respect and enjoyed considerable freedom and space for the articulation of their agency.[15]

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[9] Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 85.

[10] Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 100.

[11] Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23.

[12] Gulbadan Begum, *Ahval-i-Humayun Badshah*, trans. A. Beveridge (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1994), 161. He needed their advice on whether he should have the khutba read in his name.

[13] Ruby Lal, "Challenge of a princess' memoir", *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, No. 1 (Jan 2003): 60

[14] Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnama,* vol 3, 1222-1223.

[15] Khwaja, "Fosterage," 51.

Being mothers and caregivers of princes also made these women invested in becoming advocates and guides for their children. While talking about Khusrau, Jahangir mentioned how "the mothers and sisters of Khusrau repeatedly represented to me that he was very repentant of his deeds." Later Jahangir felt fatherly affection and sent for Khusrau to come and pay respects to Jahangir every day.[16] Khusrau's mother Jagat Gosain wrote to him and urged the prince to be sincere and affectionate towards Jahangir.[17] As mentioned before, senior mothers helped with the reconciliation of Akbar and Salim, with Salima-Sultan Begum asked to convince the prince to come out of his isolation.[18] The same can also be read as senior women protecting familial bonds.

They were keen to safeguard the future of their families, and by extension that of the Mughal State. Maham Angah and Hamida Banu Begam (respectively the wet nurse and mother of Akbar) actively opposed the dominance of Akbar's *ataliq* (tutor), Bayram Khan. Women were sent on diplomatic missions and sought favours for their husbands or relatives at court.[19] Court records often reference a reduction in the severity of punishment meted out to their kin after intervention from female relatives.[20]

Pillars of Culture and Tradition

These women also went on to become important figures in the maintenance and transmission of cultural norms. The essentiality of "great royal traditions," as Lal argues, was central to the conception of the courts of all the early Mughal rulers. These traditions became significantly further consolidated under Akbar. Senior mothers paid careful attention to tradition and protocol and were the watchful eyes that regulated minute rules of social interaction.[21] Tradition was preserved (and perpetuated) by their bodily and reproductive functions. It was also passed down due to their role as elders and advisers. Mothers thus became both the inheritors and transmitters of tradition in both roles.[22]

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[16] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 252.

[17] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 56.

[18] Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama Memoirs of Jahangir,* trans. W.M. Thackston (New York: Oxford Society Press, 1999), 11.

[19] Balkrishan Shivram, "Thicker than Blood: The Social And Political Significance Of Wet Nurses In Mughal Empire Of North India" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 69. (2008): 412.

[20] Rajoshree Ghosh, "Negotiating Kinship Norms", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 77. (2016): 234.

[21] Lal, "Challenges of a Princess' Memoir", 57.

[22] Lal, "Challenges of a Princess' Memoir" 58.

This is evident in the functions hosted by senior mothers like Dildar Begum (Humayun's stepmother) where "all the ladies of the court were present" and Humayun saw his to-be-wife Hamideh Banu Begum for the first time. Jahangir also mentions several celebrations taking place in the house of Maryam-uz-Zamani such as his yearly weighings,[23] the marriage feast of Parwiz[24] , the feast of the solar year[25] etc. The responsibility of organising the celebration, making the seating plans, upholding the traditions and the name of the Mughal state were placed on her shoulders which allows us to gauge the sphere of influence of such senior women.

Sehar Khawaja talks about how foster motherhood established an extended network of allegiance and loyalty that was politically significant in Mughal imperial court culture. Inter-familial allegiances mediated through delegated and/or shared motherhood was crucial to the dynastic strategy of moulding kinship within the Mughal household.[26] Similarities can be drawn with the Ottoman empire where women played a central role in the public projection of sovereignty. This included the conduct of public rituals of imperial legitimisation and royal patronage of monumental building and artistic production.[27]

Allowances and Architecture: Economic Capabilities of Mothers

The political importance of these women was often determined by their economic capabilities and material realities. For some, their relationship with the emperor often allowed them to possess as much wealth as high-ranking officials. They were given regular monthly allowances and maintenance grants which could be supplemented whenever high personal expenditures warranted.[28] Ellison B Findly gives details of their income, "half of this allowance came from the royal treasury and the other half was given in the form of a grant (jagir) of a district of land (pargana) which often yielded more than the stipulated amount of the allowance."[29]

They also engaged in other commercial exploits that added to their wealth. Maryam-uz-Zamani participated in overseas trade. She owned the *Rahimi* , among the largest ships in the Indian Ocean. Senior women also received revenue from the custom dues exacted on travellers and merchants who

[23] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 78.

[24] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 81.

[25] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 148.

[26] Khwaja, "Fosterage," 41.

[27] Pierce, *Imperial Harem*, Preface.

[28] Elison Banks Findly, "The Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamānī's Ship: Mughal Women and European Traders", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108. (Apr- Jun, 1988): 229.

[29] Findly, "The Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamānī's Ship," 229.

passed through their lands. Additionally, they received a return on their investments in shipping trade in the Red Sea and Europe.

Maham Anagah, the most important foster mother of Akbar was the most influential person in his court for many years, which must have contributed towards enabling some degree of upward mobility for her family. Her son Adham Khan Koka became one of Akbar's foremost generals. It is fascinating to note that the emperor's foster mothers and sisters held the title of *sadr-i anas* (an official responsible for heading the administration and organization of the harem).[30] With these responsibilities came opportunities to acquire wealth and gain access to the throne, which eventually translated into political power.[31] Balkrishnan notes that the examples of wet nurses in the chronicles provide details on affinal links that help visualise the power paradigm of that time.[32]

In his memoirs, Jahangir mentions visiting the gardens of Bika Begam, Maryam-Makhani, and Shahr-Banu Begam that reflected their architectural prowess and evidence of their economic resources.[33] Senior women clearly upheld forms of Muslim noblesse signifying their means and wealth.[34] The link between motherhood and material gains for senior members becomes evident through a reference by Jahangir who "increased the allowances of all the veiled ladies of my father's harem from 20 percent to 100 percent according to their condition and relationship".[35]

To Love and To Hold: Analysing a Mother's Love

Despite scarce references, chronicles allow for the reconstruction of the emotional and intimate aspects of motherhood. Stories of close and lifelong mother-son bonds are plentiful.[36] For instance, Maham Begum made a statement related to Humayun's illness where she said to Babur, "you are a king; you have other sons. I sorrow because I only have this one."[37] While Maham might have looked after Humayun only to increase her own position as an extension, the existence of a bond of love and care cannot be eliminated. In the *Akbarnama*, there is mention of Hamideh Banu's "great love"

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[30] Shivram Balkrishan, "Milk Kinship — Interim Reflections On Mughal "Fosterage", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 68. (2007): 375.

[31] Shivram, "Thicker than Blood", 406.

[32] Balkrishan Shivram, "Milk Kinship"

[33] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 106.

[34] Pierce, *Imperial Harem*, 8.

[35] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 148.

[36] Munis D. Faruqui, D. *The Princes of the Mughal Empire.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 72.

[37] Gulbadan, *Ahval,* 104-105.

for Akbar and his "utmost delight" at her presence.[38] These references also clearly point towards the expectation of love, care, and devotion in the relationship of motherhood. In the Ottoman court too, mothers developed a retroactive status as protectors of princely power.[39]

This also held true for foster mothers. Islam considered kinship created by delegated suckling (*rida' a*) fully equivalent to consanguinity (*nasab*).[40] Balkrishnan notes that breastfeeding was more than a merely biological act, "it is an aspect of 'mothering'- the culturally constructed bonding between mother and child, grounded in specific historical and cultural practices."[41] The importance of breastfeeding is also reflected in *Jahangirnama* which states that, "milk appears in the breasts of mothers by reason of the affection they have for their young."[42]

Sehar Khawaja notes the public acts of reverence performed by Jahangir for his mothers. He waited on Maryam-uz-Zamani outside the fort walls, and carried the corpse of his deceased foster mother in his arms as evidence of love and emotional bonding between them. Jahangir also makes a mother's love explicit when he mentions how he felt love for his sister Shakaru-un-Nisa Begam such as children have for their mothers.[43]

It would also be fruitful here to look at maternal love amidst several court networks. Munis Faruqui[44] in his work discusses how princes would often carve out diplomatic relationships that could help at the time of ascension. Having a powerful woman by your side who could aid the same was a huge asset.

Conclusion

It is important to mention here that 'mothers' as a class of women was not homogenous and was a hierarchical and stratified space. This is evident in *Jahangirnama* where wives of high status like Jagat Gosain are mentioned by name but concubines are mentioned in passing. Hierarchy was also

[38] Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnama,* vol 3, 574.

[39] Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity*, 101.

[40] Shivram, "Thicker than Blood", 403.

[41] Balkrishan Shivram, "Milk Kinship," 372.

[42] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 240.

[43] Jahangir, *Memoirs of Jahangir*, 36.

[44] Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire,* 75.

followed at the time of gift distribution to women and tent allocations according to the *Humayunama*.[45]

Additionally, to simply argue that these women were all powerful and did not have to submit to the constructs of male authority and orthodox patriarchy would be a reductive view of the complex power dynamics at work. Even they had to bear the innate burden that came with being a woman in medieval times, with limited mobility and the eternal *pardah* restricting their view of the world beyond the harem. The idea that senior mothers were important shows that authority was channelled from a close connection to a man and not independently. They lived their lives in "intricate and varied assemblages" which were invariably centered around the king.[46]

Their unique ability to have power within the several bindings of unequal access and marginalization is exceptional. Their role as caregivers of the future kings and princes, repositories of wisdom and tact, and the pillars of tradition make them important social actors within the dynamic world of the Mughals. Their access to material wealth and engagement in the predominantly masculine trading arena is also an indicator of how exceptional their place as senior mothers made them.

In conclusion, this paper would like to highlight the role played by motherhood in providing hitherto marginalised women entry into corridors of power. The paper would also like to emphasise the need to study women of the past as conscious and dominant actors of history.

[45] Gulbadan, *Ahval,* 129.

[46] Rudrangshu Mukherjee, "Foreword" in *Domesticity and Power,* Ruby Lal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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Shaping Collective Identity and Political Consciousness in Kashmir: A Comprehensive Study of the Poetry of Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor and Abdul Ahad Azad

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the revolutionary fervour of Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor and Abdul Ahad Azad through an inquiry into their contributions vis à vis the landscapes of their poetry and that of Kashmir. Using Bernard Cohn's idea of a 'cultural renaissance,' it investigates the cultural extraction of historical ideas and personalities from their previously embedded symbolic form and its consequent objectification, which allows it to be conceptualised as a 'thing' that can be remodelled to generate prescriptions for the present. The paper explores dissemination of their poetry and production of ideas of social justice, freedom, and liberation in the mystic pastoral mise-en-scéne of Kashmiri poetry. It attempts to reconstruct the process of building a political consciousness and a collective identity in the 1930s-40s, following centuries of subjugation. Finally, it examines the poets' persistent attempt to draw upon the Persianate tradition of textual intercommunication which is facilitated by the employment of the same poetic *zameen* (penultimate rhyme and refrain of the ghazal form) as another poet. According to Abdul Manan Bhat— this also allows the poets to congregate in the "zameen" of poetry, and its recitation in the same "zameen" (here, Kashmir) as other poets allow a congregation on land. I extend this hypothesis to argue that a recitation amongst the masses— through contemporary music records and traditional songs called *wanwun*— allows the poets to congregate in the "zameen" of their homeland alongside their ideas of social justice. Thus, actualising the nom de plume of Azad (meaning freedom), and marking the final return of Mahjoor (meaning the exiled one) to his homeland.

Keywords: Collective identity, political consciousness, freedom, vernacular Renaissance, resistance

Zindagee kyaah? Inkalaaban hinz kitaab
Inkalaab-o-Inkalaab-o-Inkalaab.

Zindagee hyund asal maane iztaraab
Iztaraabuk mane matlab inkalaab.

[What is life but the book of change?
Change—more change—and yet more change![1]

Flux is the living reality,
And change (is) the meaning of flux.]

- Abdul Ahad Azad, Inkalaab

Introduction

Written culture evolved in Kashmir in the verse form.[2] The earliest examples of Kashmiri poetry can be traced to fourteenth century *vakhs* and *shrukhs* of Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul-Alam.[3] These drew heavily on a mystical mise-en-scéne and employed naturalistic metaphors to express intricate philosophical ideas. However, later imitators of the mystic phase riddled with Persian stylisation created a stagnation in the literary landscape—which according to Gauhar aided indifference and complacency amongst the masses. Against this background, Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, born in 1887 in Mitrigam and his later contemporary Abdul Ahad Azad, born in 1903 in Ranger emerged onto the mystic literary landscape of Kashmir in the 1930s.

At a political level, the landscape of Kashmir had been witness to a cycle of successive subjugation under the Mughals, Pathans, Sikhs, and the Dogras who were accorded the possession of the valley, along with its

[1] The translation is taken from Trilokinath Raina's 'An Anthology of Modern Kashmiri Verse.' *Inkalaab / Inquilab* can also be translated to mean revolution.

[2] The first examples of prose in Kashmiri emerged during the local progressive writers' movement in the 1940s.

[3] While the fourteenth century works of Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul-Alam are the oldest recorded verses in Kashmiri, Abdul Ahad Azad in "Kashmiri Zabaan aur Shayiri" argues that these verses exhibit a degree of refinement that could not have been achieved in such a young language. Through his extensive empirical research on the poetry culture of Kashmir he argues that earlier examples of literature must have existed, though they are lost now.

people and resources by the East India Company for a sum of 75 lakh *nanakshahi* rupees[4] in 1846.[5] Production was controlled through a four hundred yearlong system of forced labour called *begar* in many sectors which pushed the people into a state of misery. Further, missionary accounts attest to a series of droughts, famines, earthquakes and epidemics throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The objectification of history

Parallel to this trend of impoverishment, reverberations of the ideas of the Bolshevik revolution and the sub-continent's Progressive Writers' Movement also began to be felt in the valley, with Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor pioneering this expression in literature. Initially, akin to the subcontinent's progressive writers, he chose Urdu as his medium of expression but upon realising its constraints he shifted back to Kashmiri. He also founded a literary journal called *Kongposh* which inspired a shift amongst writers of the local progressive literary movement like Abdul Ahad Azad to revert to using Kashmiri as their medium of expression. Thus, initiating a process of cultural renaissance which for the first time created a nucleus of elites who were politically conscious. The terminology of renaissance presupposes a rebirth or a process of rejuvenating past ideas. Bernard Cohn in another context conceptualises this as the extraction of past ideas and personalities from its previously embedded symbolic form and its consequent objectification. This allows it to be conceptualised as a 'thing' that can be remodelled to generate prescriptions for the present.[6]

Cohn's conceptualisation of a cultural renaissance can be contextualised through the frequent use of allusions in the poetry of Azad and Mahjoor. Through their allusions to eminent past personalities, they imagine an ideal enlightened past of Kashmir and of the dispossessed Kashmiri. This process of objectifying symbols located beyond the temporality of foreign despotic rule attempts to create a sense of pride in the vernacular identity. Further, a juxtaposition with the oppressive conditions of the present mobilises a call for action to return to the imagined glory of the past. Their attempt to return to the 'glorious' past is also reflected in their choice of form—with Mahjoor embracing the local poetic form of *watsun*[7], and Azad of *qita*.[8]

[4] Nanakshahi rupee was used as the currency during the Sikh rule of Kashmir.

[5] The Treaty of Amritsar of 1846 signed between the East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh facilitated a sale of the valley of Kashmir for seventy-five lakh nanakshahi rupees.

[6] Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia" in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 225-229.

[7] Watsun is a traditional lyrical form consisting of three line stanzas, followed by a refrain which are often seen to be interchangeable with the Persian ghazal.

[8] The lyrical form of Qita is imagined to be very close to the Persian Ruba'i, which puts forth a theory in three lines and condenses its meaning in the fourth line.

Abdul Ahad Azad in his poem *"Savaal"* alludes to the prominent Kashmiri scholarship of Kalhana (12th century), Gani Kashmiri (1630-1669) and Yaqoob Sarfi (1521-1595) to elucidate this imagination of an enlightened past. He contrasts this with the harsh realities of the Dogra rule—through the deployment of 'water' as a metaphor, he creates an ideal past whose meaning is crystallised by the oppressive conditions of the present which he imagines to be fatally poisonous.

Kalhan, Gani ti Sarfi seyraab ker yem aaban
Suye aab saani baapat zehr-e-hilal aasiya

[In whose providence Kalhan, Gani and Sarfi flourished
would those waters prove hemlock for us?] [9]

Mahjoor in one of his poems speaks alongside Iqbal's "*Khitab ba Javanan-i islam"* to wake the Kashmiri Muslim from his slumber of ignorance by exemplifying the 'golden' past of Kashmir. He alludes to its rich mystic tradition and the might of its last native king, Zayn ul-Abidin. He builds on this idea of an ideal past by expressing the failure of the world to replicate their stature and knowledge.

Bata ay muslim-i kashmir kabhi socha bhi hai tunay
ki tu hai kis gulshan-i rangin ka barg-i shakh-i uryani
terey aslaf thay voh jin kay 'ilm-o fazl kay agay
adab sai jhuktay thay danishvaran-i hind-o irani
shahanshah-i mu'azzam shah zay'n-al abadin
kiya Akbar nay jis say kasb a'in-i jahan bani
nazir uska dikha sakta nahin yeh chakh-i dolabi
agar lakhon baras karta rahay ga charkh gardani[10]

[Tell me, O Kashmiri Muslim, have you given any thought to the colourful garden full of possibilities,
of whose trees you are an unsheathed leaf
To pay respect to the knowledge and wisdom of your ancestors
Gnostics from India and Iran used to bow their heads
The king among kings, Zayn-ul Abidin
From whom Akbar acquired the code to rule the world
The skies cannot point to any one like him

[9] Abul Ahad Azad, "Sawaal," in *Kuliyat-i-Azad: Abdul Ahad Azad Marhoom Ka Mukammal Kalam,* ed. Padam Nath Ganju (1977)

[10] Abdul Ahad Azad, *Kashmiri Zabaan Aur Shayri* (Srinagar: J and K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages., 1982), 59.

Even if they spin the wheels of time for a million years][11]

Rejuvenation of literary traditions

Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor catalysed a modernist shift in Kashmiri poetry. He discarded themes of stylised love, 'foreign' symbols, sights and songs of the Perso-Arabic poetic system with localised symbols and folk forms.[12] His experience as a *patwari* (government official responsible for maintaining ownership records and revenue collection) during the Dogra rule shaped his aesthetic and thematic choices to reflect the realities of oppression as well as the hopes of the common people. His writings, for the first time, allowed an anchor to the themes of social justice, freedom and liberty within the pastoral misé-en-scene of Kashmiri poetry. He moved away from Persian forms of writing and re-embraced local literary traditions like *watsun.* He founded a local newspaper called *Gaash* in 1940, however, it temporarily shut down due to an increase in paper prices following World War II.[13] He was also a founding member of the Cultural Congress which became the epicentre of progressive thought in Kashmir.

Abdul Ahad Azad took forth this modernist shift and introduced a revolutionary character in the oeuvre of Kashmiri poetry. His thematics were informed by ideas of Marxist philosophy, humanism and local philosophical thought like the maxim of Mansoor's *Anal Haq.* Azad's usage of traditional forms of *geet* and *qita*, and his experiments with mystical and romantic themes also evidence traditionalist influence. His poems often exhibit a satirical critique of oppressive frameworks and religious extremism. Both Mahjoor and Azad widely experimented with traditional literary conventions and attempted to masculinise the traditionally feminine yearner.

Mahjoor and Azad used the mise-en-scéne of the romantic tradition of Kashmiri poetry which is generally laid around an ecosystem of a garden or a pasture (which also symbolises the poet's homeland, Kashmir) to create new meanings of an arena for political action. Mahjoor's famous poem "*Vwalo haa baagvaano*" (translated as *Come, Oh Gardener!*) inaugurated Sheikh Abdullah's Naya Kashmir manifesto. The title reveals a call for action and establishes the tone of the poem. The traditional metaphors of *gul* and bulbul meet again in Mahjoor's poem to preach new meanings of social justice and liberation.

Mahjoor juxtaposes the garden with twin meanings—of literature and Kashmir. He calls upon the people of Kashmir (the gardeners) — to realise the actualities of the Dogra suppression and the stagnated literary

[11] Abdul Manan Bhar,"Future's Moving Terrains" *English Language Notes* 61, no. 2. (2023): 23–38, https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-10782054.

[12] Jawaharlal Handoo. "Contemporary Kashmiri Poetry" *Indian Literature,* Sept.–Oct. 22, no. 5, (1979).

[13] Ghulam Nabi Khayal, *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir* (Srinagar, Kashmir: Khayalaat Publishers, 2011).

culture— and implores them to organise and agitate to return this 'garden' to its past glory. Zareef Ahmad Zareef views the role of the 'gardener' to have been actualised politically by the leadership of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah. Mahjoor contrasts the lively imagery of spring with the mise-en-scéne of a catastrophised garden and registers the realities of the people through wails of dew. He further connotes the Dogra establishment as invasive nettles that are hindering the growth of the flower (Kashmiris). The desolated imagery could also be interpreted to represent the state of the stagnated literary landscape, with the language registering its wails through the disrupted horticultural images. He employs the traditional avian metaphor of the *'bulbul'* (a small songbird) to represent the native Kashmiris who have been entrapped in the cage of the 'feudalistic' set up. This cage could again be interpreted as the constraints put on the native language by Perso-Arabic stylisation. He returns the agency to the caged bird by issuing a call for action and imploring it to forge its own freedom. He creates a sense of agency and belongingness vis a vis his insistence on realising the right of the people to possess and govern their land. Finally, he implores people to move towards creating a new spring through a revolution which is implied by naturalistic images of earthquakes, lightning and storms.

Vwalo haa baagvaano navbahaaruk shan paada kar
Phwolan gul gath karan bulbul tithee saamaan paada kar

Chaman vaaraan rivaan shabnam tsatith jaamay pareshaan gul
Gulan tay bulbul andar dubaaray jaan paada kar

Kare kus bulbulaa aazaad panjras manz tsu nalaan chhukh
Tsu pananye dasta pananyan mushkilan aasan paada kar

Hakoomat maalo dolat naazo nemat beyi shahnshaahi
Yi soruy chhuy tse nish paanas tsu amichee zaan paadaa kar

Agar vuzanaavahan baste gulan hans trav zeero bam
Bunyul kar vaav kar gagraay kar toophaan paada kar.

[Come, gardener! Create the glory of spring !
Make guls bloom and bulbuls sing,
Create such haunts!

The dew weeps and your garden lies desolate,
tearing the robes, your flowers are distracted
Breathe life once again into the lifeless gul and the bulbul!

Rank nettles hamper the growth of your roses,

Weed them out, for look thousands
Of laughing hyacinths are crowding at the gate!

Who will set you free, captive bird, crying in your cage?
Forge with your hands—
The instruments of your deliverance!

Wealth and pride and comfort, luxury and authority,
Kingship and governance— all these are yours;
Wake up, sleeper, and know these as yours!

Bid good-bye to your dulcet strains, to rouse
This habit of flowers, create a storm,
Let thunder rumble— let there be an earthquake!][14]

Azad assumes the voice of a river in his long humanistic and descriptive poem *"Daryaav"* (The River) which shapes the narrative structure. The River lends itself as a pathway meandering through various terrains in a forward motion—signifying the movement of the *Vitasta* from its origins in Verinag towards its final destination, an imagined revolution.[15] He employs naturalistic romantic imagery throughout the poem and registers his affinity towards nature. According to Gauhar, this affinity towards the surroundings of the river Jhelum which flows through the heart of the valley evidences his love for the (home)land. As the narrative mimics the flow of the river, Azad informs the readers of the realities of human life and subjugation by creating two opposing binaries, of the fairness, harmony and truthfulness of nature against the cruel, arbitrary divisions and preoccupations of the human being or the capitalistic set up. Finally, the narrative which is embodied by the flow of the river, culminates into a classless society governed by social justice. This climax draws its inspiration from Marx's fifth stage of historical materialism and Azad imagines its final stage, communism to be the ideal state of being.

Bu vathraan pharshi makhmal pyath kinaaran taaza yaraan kyut
Mazooran thakymutyan beyi soka vaalyan dostdaaran kyut
Behyan raahat karan dava farhataah vaatyakh dilan andar

Ameerah badshaahaha aastyan hyondaah mussalmaanah
Bu kath praaras bihin chhaavin cheyin naavin barin baanaah
Me nish raajaah navabaah saayilaah aka saayilaan andar

[14] Trilokinath Raina, *An Anthology of Modern Kashmiri Verse (*Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & Languages), 72.

[15] Local name for river Jhelum.

Sanyar vognyaar bathy tay bera deeshith jera chum yivan
Kunyaar yaksaan chus aab assit vaara tulavyan tyongalan andar
Yin gatshanuk zyanuk maranuk na chhum parvaah na chhum kaanh gam [16]

[I spread green velvet carpets
On my banks for friends,
For tired limbs of hard-worked labour
And for lovers of pleasure;
They come and sit and bathe and drink in freedom and in joy.

But I do not wait for any one!
Hindus, Muslims, men of wealth,
Rajas, nawabs come and rest,
Seeking balm for bruised spirits.
But to me they are all suppliants
Among the many who come to me.

I shall not rest till the world is rid
Of embankments that divide,
Of ditch and hollow that deform
Its smooth and lovely face.
This passion, like a consuming fire,
Burns me even though I'm water.

Coming and going, birth and death
Are all the same to me.] [17]

Political Consciousness

Poetry became central in the production and dissemination of revolutionary ideas in a largely illiterate society. The crippling economic conditions made it impossible to facilitate the transaction of large texts and confined the print form to pamphlets with a maximum capacity of eight verses. These were sold for less than an *aana.* To maximise the dissemination of their message, elements of folklore were retained as evidenced by Mahjoor's poem *"Albaen",* Azad frequently employed traditional sufi lexica like *sozi dil, sozi jigar and deen kuffar* to express his revolutionary ideas. Mahjoor also partnered with folksingers like

[16] This is an excerpt from the poem Daryaav.

[17] Raina, An Anthology of Modern Kashmiri Verse, 72.

Mahmood Shehri and Ghaffar Lojur to disseminate his poetry amongst the masses.[18] Collective singing was routineised to create a nucleus of political consciousness. The preface of a collection of poems (including that of Mahjoor and Azad) published in 1947 titled *Gaye Ja Kashmir* talks about the power of song in exposing the realities of oppression to the masses and traces its inspiration to the Chinese resistance against Japanese imperialism. The remarkable popularity of Mahjoor's couplets is attested by Balraj Sahni in the *Vista Bharti Quarterly* who states:

> [H]is songs and his poems are the cherished property of every man, woman and child living between Baramullah and Pir Panchal. If Mahjoor writes a poem today, it will be on the lips of the populace within a fortnight. Children on their way to school, girls thrashing rice, boatmen plying the paddle, labourers bending in their ceaseless toil, all will be singing it.

Mahjoor and Azad tried to pull out Kashmiris from the self-denial into which self-styled mystic poets had thrown them.[19] Consequently, establishing the base of a new emerging political consciousness and collective identity which was then organised politically by Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah under the Quit Kashmir movement. In my interview with contemporary poet and a prominent Kashmiri literary critic Zareef Ahmad Zareef, he argued that Mahjoor's call to an imagined 'gardener' in his poems to restore the glory of the homeland (Kashmir) was actualised by the leadership of Abdullah. The remodelling of the Muslim Conference into a secular party called the National Conference ensued a difference within the populace — to which Zareef believes Mahjoor wrote the following couplet serenading the leader Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah to guide Kashmir—symbolised as *gul* (flower) and its voiceless people towards the right path.

> *Bulbulan dopp gulas husn chu poor*
> *Kyah wanaye zyev chi ni suye chu kasoor*
> *Bezabaan yeti chi ni zinde rozaan*
> *Maari myeti vaare vati laag soun paan*
>
> [Bulbul told the gul of her beauty
> But alas, her voicelessness is her misery.
> Death is the fate of the voiceless (here)
> Beloved guide us to the right path]

Zareef traced the next couplet to be a continuation of the previous one, expressed according to him, in disappointment and dejection following the signing of the Treaty of Accession which surrendered the

[18] Khayal, Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir, 52.

[19] G. N Gauhar, *Abdul Ahad Azad* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), 28.

sovereignty of Kashmir to the newly formed Indian State. Mahjoor uses the word *"cxog"* to refer to the crown of the bulbul's head and the Brahmana Shikha, both signifying honour and knowledge.[20] In the absence of this symbol, he critiques Abdullah's decision of signing the accession. The shaven head retains its cultural connotation of loss in the Hindu tradition to signify the loss of the political leader's honour by surrendering the right to the homeland.

Bulbulo katti cxogh ravrith aakh
bol bosh karnas ti ma korhaye thaakh
Massekalle ousaye kaesit aakh
Bulbulo katti cxogh ravrith aakh.

[O bulbul where have you lost your crown[21]
Did they also seal your lips?
You had a head full of hair;
You came back shaven
O bulbul where have you lost your crown]

While Azad did not formally align with any political party, his revolutionary ideas condensed into a cloud of suspicion around him, leading the state to raid his house and torture his family in the aftermath of the massacre of 1931. In the wake of the Quit Kashmir movement, Azad wrote one of his most famous poems *"Haa Vatandaaro Ho"* (O, My Countryman) imploring the people to rise from the sleep of fear and agitate against the feudal order of the Dogras. The refrain: "Awaken, my countrymen" encapsulates both the purpose and essence of his writing. He employs pastoral imagery to connote the social realities and the hopes of the revolution. Soil represents fear, hinting at both the feudalistic set up of the administration and the deeply entrenched slumber of the common man. Revolution is embodied in the imagery of flames hinting towards the process of smelting as a means to achieve the final result, which emerges as a meadow of flowers, signifying a desaturation of fear and thus, symbolising a liberated homeland.

Tshyata kyaazi goy gaaratuk naaro ho
Gatsha bedaar haa vatandaaro ho

Chukh dabyomut khofuchi rabi andar
Bumsinyi handy paathy chhay traavmuts lar
Laura maaraan neroo shaahmaaro ho
Gatshta bedaar haa vatandaaro ho

[20] Sanskrit meaning a tuft of hair kept at the head by a Hindu following tonsure.

[21] 'Cxogh' also refers to shikha.

Joshi andrimi tondruki data akh tsath
Treti handy paathy pyata arkhalanuy pyath
Poshi vananuy tsali khaara khaaro ho
Gatshta bedaar haa vatandaaro

[The fire of your honour is out
Awake, my countryman!

Do not sleep like a worm,
buried deep in the mud of fear.
Come out in your hooded majesty.
Awake, my countryman!

Caught in a whirlpool, you are amazed to see
Your stone becomes glass, your quicksilver water,
The pearls of your necklace are worthless beads.
Awake, my countryman!

Let flames leap out of the oven to your heart!
Fall like lightning on noxious nettles,
and meadows of flowers will live without fear.
Awake, my countryman!][22]

Conclusion

The penultimate rhyme and refrain of the *ghazal* is called its 'zameen.' Through the replication of another poet's zameen, Persianate tradition enables an intercommunication between the poets. Abdul Manan Bhat extends this conception to argue that this appropriation allows poets to congregate in the zameen (landscape) of poetry. I use this hypothesis to argue that through the employment of the form of *watsun*. Mahjoor congregates with the sixteenth century poetess Haba Khatoon, and Azad's expressions in the local five-versed form of *qita* allows a congregation with Lal Ded and Nund Reshi.

Zareef Ahmad Zareef contextualises the relevance of the revolutionary ideas of the poetry of Mahjoor and Azad in the current geopolitical context by arguing that the conditions of oppression have remained unchanged—only the name of the oppressor has changed. Their poetry continues to be echoed within the Kashmiri collective consciousness—through new compositions by contemporary singers like Ali Saffudin and Yawar Abdal, and through traditional songs of *wanwun* which continue the tradition of collective

[22] Azad, "Haa Vatandaaro Ho".

singing. Bhat argues that the practice of invoking another poet's *zameen* enables them to congregate in language, and its recitation on the same zameen as other poets allows a congregation on land. The word zameen as land or home (or homeland) through association also raises connotative meanings of ownership and freedom. I extend Bhat's hypothesis to argue that a recitation amongst the masses allows the poets to congregate in the zameen of their homeland alongside their ideas of social justice and the connotative call for freedom or *azaadi*. Thus, actualising the nom de plume of Azad, meaning freedom, and marking the final return of Mahjoor, meaning 'the exiled one' to his homeland. This 'imagining of future(s)' also allows us to move beyond the statist conceptualisation of Kashmiri futures as a negotiation between India and Pakistan, and its imagination of the autochthonous community as entities that neither speak nor exist.

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A Study of People's History through Fahmida Riaz's *Hum Log*

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Abstract

Fahmida Riaz (28 July 1946 - 21 November 2018) was an Urdu poet, novelist, and translator from Pakistan, known for her anti-authoritarian and feminist writings. While her poems have been studied for the challenges they pose to patriarchal masculinity, fascism, and religious orthodoxy, her prose as a reflection of socio-political issues remains relatively less explored. This paper analyses her work *Hum Log*. Hum Log is a compilation of three novels by Riaz: *Zinda Bahar Lane, Karachi,* and *Godavari*, based in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India respectively. The characters in Riaz's novels share multiple historical identities that they come across in their daily trajectories. Deriving from the idea of a composite culture, she projects the shared daily identities of the people of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The emphasis is on the social inequalities and political violence that people, especially marginalised sections experience. This paper will attempt to analyse how the author brings out the sentiments of these people, often similar to each other's experiences.

Keywords: Fahmida Riaz, Hum Log, Muhajirs, Biharis, Warlis, violence

Introduction

Fahmida Riaz (28 July 1945 - 21 November 2018) was a Pakistani author and activist known for her anti-authoritarian and feminist writings. She was born in Meerut in the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh) in British India when the subcontinent was struggling with communal disturbances that culminated in the partition of the South Asian subcontinent. In this atmosphere, her family shifted to Hyderabad in the Sindh province of Pakistan, where she grew up learning Sindhi, Urdu, and Persian. During her college years in Karachi (1964-1967), Pakistan was dealing with issues of oppression of refugees, linguistic conflicts, and state oppression under the military rule of General Ayub Khan (1958-1969).[1]

Riaz's literary career began at the age of seventeen with the publication of her first poem (1963) in a literary journal called *Funoon*. Riaz's writings reveal her concern for social and political issues that coincided with the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1978-88). His regime was marked by attempts at Islamisation of the nation, draconian censorship laws, and curbing women's independence. Against this backdrop, she often published in the monthly socio-political journal *Awaz* which was very critical of Zia's regime. The journal eventually had to shut down, and Riaz and her husband were charged with sedition. This event forced her to seek exile in India in 1978.

With the help of the Punjabi poetess Amrita Pritam (31st August 1919 - 31st October 2005), Riaz was able to take refuge in India, where she stayed for almost a decade. She lived in New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia as a poet-in-residence from 1982 to 1983 and in Jawaharlal Nehru University as a senior research fellow from 1986 to 1987. It was only in 1988 after Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister (1988-1990) that she returned to Pakistan. In November 2018, the poet and author passed away, leaving behind a rich literary legacy for the subcontinent.[2]

Riaz authored more than a dozen novels, several poetry collections, and translations that can be read and analysed from various perspectives. Her oeuvre may be read as feminist, socialist and as trans-nationalist. She believed that literature can bring about desirable changes in society and even in the functioning of the government.[3] Her work revolves around the lives of ordinary people contextualised within varied socio-political contexts, offering people's narratives as opposed to the

[1] Amina Yaqin & Naiza Khan,"Partition and its echoes in Karachi: The political agencies of Fahmida Riaz and Perween Rahman" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 57(3) (2022): 119-178. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219894221115910.

[2] Subodh Lal, *Fahmida Riaz: The Iconic Iconoclast* (NP Mehta Publications, 2023), 40.

[3] Fahmida Riaz, "Fahmida Riaz - Interview," interview by Rakhshanda Jalil, *The Hindu,* June 2, 2011, text ttp://hindustaniawaaz-rakhshanda.blogspot.com/2011/06/fahmida-riaz-interview.html.

state narratives which can be used as histories from below. As 'personal memories' insulated from the political discourse, they capture the public sentiment and challenge the state's silence on oppression.

Her trilogy *Hum Log* (roughly, 'We, the people') (2013) is a compilation of three 'travelogues'- *Zinda Bahar Lane, Godavari*, and *Karachi* based in Dhaka (Bangladesh), Mumbai (India), and Karachi (Pakistan) respectively.[4] These works offer her accounts of people's history contextualised within the larger political situation in these three nations. They document the oppression, marginalisation and communal violence ongoing in these regions during the 1980s and 1990s. In everyday conversations among characters of Riaz's stories, one comes across various comparisons and parallels across the experiences of the people of these three nations and indirect references to the commonality of social experiences. While this paper does not delve into a detailed analysis of the same, it becomes imperative to mention that all the above-mentioned works have female protagonists, whose experiences draw from the life of the author.

Situating *Hum Log* in the historical background

The struggle against colonial rule resulted not only in independence but also the division of British India into two separate nation-states, India and Pakistan in August 1947. By 1971, Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan had declared its independence from its western half. These two events not only remain prominent in the popular consciousness but are also used by political leaders and the media to reinterpret and invoke certain ideas of identity, memory and history. A huge corpus of historical and fictional work on violence, personal memory, exile, victimhood and other themes has been produced and it is an illustrated fact that the legacy of these two historical events continues to impact people in tremendous ways.

Anam Zakaria in her book *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* has written that the "intergenerational memory" of partitions looms large over the daily modes of existence of the people.[5] Ravinder Kaur in her book *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* has illustrated how the narratives of partition continue to shape our lives, and has looked closely at the histories of the partition as experienced by communities oppressed due to caste and class locations.[6]

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[4] Fahmida Riaz, "Hum Log - Book Launch," filmed in 2014 at the Lahore Literary Festival https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfKYDuIt0xU

[5] Anam Zakaria, *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India*. (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2019), 73-115.

[6] Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 246-248.

According to Harsh Trivedi, in Riaz's work, the emphasis is on the commonality of cultures and shared heritage of the people of the subcontinent, which she describes as *"gendee ki tooti mala"* (the politically broken garland of the marigolds of our inextricably linked literatures and cultures).[7] For instance, the female protagonist of *Zinda Bahar Lane* visits a Muslim house in Bangladesh where preparations for a wedding are ongoing and notices a *mandap* (temporary platform for religious ceremonies), like the one she saw in Hindu ceremonies in India. In the next story *Karachi*, on a plane from Karachi to Dubai, the protagonist is shown thinking about a man engaged in the search for his hometown Landhi in Pakistan. Later, she comes to realise that the passenger looking for Landhi was actually an Indian man whose family migrated from Pakistan to India.

Not only does the memory of partition impact social lives, but the fault lines of partition are often exploited for political reasons, birthing narratives and inflicting consequences that cause conflict and violence against minorities. Gyanesh Kudaisya in his book *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* calls the business of partition as "unfinished" which continues to take a heavy toll on the peace and stability of the region.[8] *Godavari, Zinda Bahar Lane,* and *Karachi* are based on three different contemporary issues which emerged between 1947 and 1971. The novels focus on Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India, Bihari-Bengali conflicts in Bangladesh and Muhajir-Sindhi conflicts in Pakistan respectively.

Contextualising *Zinda Bahar Lane*

Following the partition of British India in 1947, around a million Muslim Biharis who lived in Bengal migrated to the East Pakistani cities of Dhaka and Chittagong.[9] The language spoken by Biharis was Urdu, as distinct from the majority of the Bengali-speaking population. The language difference accompanied by cultural variations led to Biharis being labelled as 'outsiders' by the Bengali-speaking majority. The political policy of West Pakistani leaders that favoured Urdu over Bengali (which was one of the root causes of Bangladesh's freedom struggle) also affected the predicament of Biharis living in Bangladesh. While the situation remained stable during the initial years, Biharis became a "target of emergent Bangladeshi nationalism of the Awami League during the language movement of 1971."[10] Bangladeshi freedom fighters targeted Biharis for allegedly

[7] Harish Trivedi, "South Asian Literature: Reflections in a Confluence." *Indian Literature* 49, no. 5 (229) (2005), 186–94. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346235.

[8] Tai Y. Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*. (Routledge, 2002),1-27.

[9] Zaglul Haider, *Biharis in Bangladesh: Transition from Statelessness to Citizenship*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 91-135.

[10] Rajarshi Dasgupta,"Geneva Camp, Dhaka: "Bihari" Refugees, State of Exception, and Camouflage," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38. no. 4, (2023): 603-621, 10.1080/08865655.2022.2164044

supporting the Pakistani army leading to widespread arrests, displacements, confiscation of property, and even large-scale killings of Biharis. After the creation of Bangladesh on December 16th, 1971, the marginalisation of and violence against Biharis intensified. The present-day Bihari population in Bangladesh accounts for 160,000, of which 90,000 live in temporary shelters in Dhaka, Mirpur, Geneva and other camps under conditions of "extreme cultural, social and economic marginalisation" as a stateless people.[11]

The novel *Zinda Bahar Lane* (Living Spring) is the story of a Pakistani woman who, on a visit to Bangladesh, is on the search for a lane called 'Zinda Bahar', where Biharis used to live. When she arrives at the Dhaka airport, she feels uncertain about leaving the airport, wondering if the *Bangla*-speaking people will reject her as an Urdu speaker or as a Pakistani. Eventually, she overcomes these preoccupations with geographical borders and moves ahead. Her apprehensions are because of a memory from 1965, when as a college student, she was supposed to visit Dhaka University. This visit was cancelled due to the outbreak of riots in the city. As the protagonist of the story (who is also the voice of the author herself) moves through the city, she is reminded of her life as a student in Pakistan in the 1960s. She also reflects on the present-day situation of Bangladesh where the memories of 1971 still afresh.

When she comes to attend a literary gathering at Bangladesh University, she searches for the lane named 'Zinda Bahar Lane'. In the meantime, she visits the Geneva camp where she encounters Bihari refugees who hope to be granted Pakistani citizenship. By delving into their history and living conditions, she expresses their sentiments of protest and hope. In one of the offices, she is surprised to find an image of General Zia-ul Haq, who they think would help them reach Pakistan. The protagonist (also Riaz herself) feels troubled looking at the image of Zia who forced her into exile. The author is also reminded of the slogans of hate against Biharis inscribed on the walls of Pakistan and contemplates the ignorance of these people who are unaware of the socio-political situation of Pakistan. During one of her visits to the Geneva camp, she meets a young man who tells her, "*mera dada Pakistan ke liye ladte hue mar gaya, baap use bachate hue aur mein Pakistan ka naam lete huye mar jaun.ga"* (my grandfather died while making Pakistan, father while saving it and I will die repeating the name of Pakistan). The concerns of this young man reflect the conflicting identities and divided legacies that people all across the three nations live with.

She also brings out the sentiments of the Bengali people who repeatedly complain of Biharis not assimilating with them and not learning Bengali. To a professor who repeats the same narrative, she replies,

[11] Rajarshi Dasgupta,"Geneva Camp, Dhaka: "Bihari" Refugees, State of Exception, and Camouflage," 603.

> *... muashray mein zam hone ko tayaar nahin, toh is ka kya matlab hua? Muaashre mein mukhtalif ikaaii.yan wajood kiun nahin rakh sakti? Zam hona kiun zaroori hai? Aap sab ko hathau.de se thonk peet kar ek jaisa banane par aakhir kiun muusir hain? Aakhir muashra toh ek matnooh cheez ka naam hai.*[12]
>
> (... not ready to assimilate in society, so what does it mean? Can different groups not exist in a society? Why is it important to assimilate? Why are you insistent on hammering everyone into the same shape? After all, 'society' is the name of a diverse entity.)[13]

This is clearly reflective of Riaz's vision of a composite society where people of all communities live in harmony. At the end of the novel, she thinks of building a house in Bangladesh but is reminded of the problems that her children might have to face for not knowing Bengali.

On *Karachi*

Karachi is an anthology of non-fiction stories which represent sectarian conflicts, especially among the Muhajirs and Sindhis that took place in the city during the 1980s and 1990s. The roots of Karachi's troubles can be traced to the unresolved issues of partition.[14] The city became a site of violence due to conflicts among different communities including Shias-Sunnis and Sindhis-Muhajirs during this period. In the late 1940s and 1950s, a huge influx of displaced Muslim migrants from northern India (Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bombay, Bihar) who migrated to Karachi and Hyderabad in the Sindh region came to be called 'Muhajirs' or the 'Urdu-speaking'. The causes of contention between the native Sindhis and the newcomers were the difference in language and the urban-rural divide; the local Sindhis were less educated than the Muhajirs. The competition for access to education, jobs, land, and political power made the Sindhis feel threatened on all fronts, especially with regard to cultural identity. From the 1960s, when the political power in Pakistan changed, the Muhajirs declined economically and politically with the imposition of Sindhi as the official language of the province under the language bill of 1972. This attempt at sidelining the interests of the Muhajirs led to the formation of the Muhajir Qaumi movement in Pakistan *(*MQM*)* under the leadership of Altaf Hussain.

The author brings forth stories where historical memory finds ways to re-emerge in different forms, associated with everyday violence and struggle. It begins with a woman on a flight from Karachi to London, where she is trying to answer the question *"Karachi mein kya ho raha hai?" (*"What is happening in Karachi?") She does not know whether these are Shia-Sunni conflicts, Muhajir-Sindhi conflicts or the role of Indian agencies, Afghanistan or perhaps America trying to interfere with the

[12] Fahmida Riaz, *Hum Log,* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.
[13] All translations have been done by the author of this paper.
[14] Tan and Kudaisya, *"Aftermath of Partition",* 1-27.

political situation of the country. Tracing a history of MQM, she draws out the politicisation of the Muhajir community as a sub-nationalist group. The state and its institutions had become tools of oppression against minorities and rather than publishing the truth, they were involved in a blame game. She expresses concern about the issues of democracy, unemployment, conflict, corruption, and censorship in Pakistan. Similar issues of common language and oppression, like that in Bangladesh, are reflected in Karachi where the Urdu speaking community became a minority under a majority of non-Urdu speakers in Sindh. While the author does not draw any grand conclusions or offer any political resolutions to the condition in Karachi, she highlights historical conflict, identity politics, accounts of migration and people's quest for justice.

Contextualising *Godavari*

Godavari is set during the time of Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay in the 1990s, where a Pakistani couple in exile gain insight into the past of the Warlis *(*a tribal group based in parts of Mumbai and Gujarat). Since the late 19th century, they were exploited by the British as they entered the hilly regions of Maharashtra to establish control over land and forest produce. The customs of *'vethbigar'* (forced labour) and *'lagnagadi'* (marriage slavery) prevailed along with other harsh methods of oppression. In 1945-47, under the leadership of Communist leaders Godavari Gokhale and her husband Sharmao Parulekar, the Warlis organised the historic Warli Adivasi revolt. The revolt became an integral part of the pre-independence peasant upsurge against landlordism in the region.[15]

Godavari's story is two-dimensional. One part of the story is about Warlis, in which the female protagonist Ma explores the history of the Warlis. Through the caretaker of the resort, Usha, she learns about Godavari Gokhale and the revolt. She consistently emphasises on her concern that very soon, these tribes would also be assimilated into the majority Maratha community and hence lose their unique culture and heritage. Through her conversations with the locals, she gets to know that people here also share the same ideas of 'othering'.

The second part deals at length with the Hindu-Muslim riots that were, at the time, taking place in mainland Maharashtra. Since the mid-1980s, the rise of Hindu nationalism and their call for an ethno-religious Hindu nation has caused significant implications for the identity and status of India's 110 million Muslims. In the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, riots broke out in Bombay in two phases; first from December 6 to 12, 1992, and the other from January 7 to January 16, 1993. They both caused significant losses in the south-central suburbs and then

[15] J Bhagyashree Shankar Jadhav,"THE WARLIS STRUGGLE IN PERSPECTIVE OF METHODOLOGY 1945–1947." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 80. (2019): 701–706. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27192923.

shifted to the western and eastern areas.[16] Around 990 people died during the riots. While Riaz does not openly talk about the immediate cause and specificity of the riots, she makes vague references to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (a Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation and the ideological parent of the Bharatiya Janata Party), the actions of cow-vigilantes, consistent attempts at the renaming places in the pursuance of the Hindu Right's political goals, the gradual erasure of history in preparation for the call for an ethno-religious state and the violence based on Hindu-Muslim polarisation. Through these two plots, Riaz carefully analyses different kinds of nationalisms and the violence that they breed. She portrays similar ideas of 'othering' at local levels that transcend race, religion as well as nation.

People's experiences

Riaz was deeply attracted to the secular spirit of India, which she found undergoing change after the 1990s with the rise of Hindu majoritarianism. Disillusioned, she wrote her iconic poem *Naya Bharat*,

> *Tum bilkul hum jaise nikle/ab tak kahān chhupe the bhaa.ī.....qaa.em hindū raaj karoge/ saare ulte kaaj karoge....kaun hai hindū kaun nahīñ hai/ tum bhī karoge fatvā jaarī* [17]
> (You turned out to be just like us/where were you hiding until now....you'll establish Hindu raj/you'll do everything wrong...who is a Hindu and who's not/you too will issue fatwas)

This poem does not just hint at the ongoing project of hollowing out India's secular spirit but also flags a shared crisis for both India and Pakistan. In the case of India, it signified the journey of a country that constituted itself as secular and in the case of Pakistan, the journey of a country that constituted itself as Islamic was initially exclusive. Yet, both eventually moved towards majoritarianism, one (Pakistan) followed by the other (India). The poem laments that India came round to following the same path as that of Pakistan.

Riaz encounters similar voices in most places she visits where people are involved in conflicts, regardless of the fact that they do not know each other. This can also be interpreted to indicate that States manipulate ordinary people to make political gains. She gives one such instance in *Godavari*, where a conversation with a young boy who is a soldier of the Shiv Sena worries her because unemployed young people were being used for political motives. When she asks the boy why he did

[16] Ali Riaz, Jobāidā Nāsarīna, Zobaida Nasreen, and Fahmida Zaman, eds. *Political Violence in South Asia.* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), 85-106.

[17] Fahmida Riaz, "तुम बिल्कुल हम जैसे निकले," Rekhta, https://www.rekhta.org/nazms/tum-bilkul-ham-jaise-nikle-tum-bilkul-ham-jaise-nikle-fahmida-riaz-nazms?lang=hi n.a, "Ghazals," Rekhta, n.d, https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/

not like Muslims, he says, "*Voh dusri tarah ke hain, woh hum mein ghulna milna nahin chahte"* ("they (Muslims) are of a different kind, they don't want to get intermixed with us").

In *Zinda Bahar Lane* too, the Bengali professors the protagonist interacts with tell her the same things about Biharis, *"Yeh hum mein zam nahin hona chahte. Yeh agar humari Bangla seekh lein toh hum inhe qubool karne ko tayaar hain"*[18] ("They (Biharis) do not want to get intermixed with us (Bengalis). If they (Biharis) learn Bengali language, we are ready to accept them.")

One also finds instances where the author tries to relate the experiences of people of these three nations with each other. A good illustration of this can be traced from *Karachi*. In a chapter named "Karachi aur German" where she laments the sectarian conflicts in Karachi, she writes that, *"Hindustan toh bahut hans raha hoga... alag toh humse ho gaye ho tum..."*[19] ("Indians must be laughing a lot at us (Pakistanis)....(saying) you got separated from us")

In the next line, she writes,

> *magar Hindustan 1995 mein nahin hans raha. Shayad voh kuchh khaas gaur se Pakistan ki taraf dekh bhi nahin raha, bal.ki tan-dahii se maathe par sindur ka ghasa maare, mazhabi junooni siyaasat ki taraf rawaañ hai. Kiun ke..kiun ke voh Pakistan se mukhtalif toh hai hi nahin, bilkul is hi jaisa hai Hindustan.*[20]
>
> (But Indians would not be laughing in 1995 (at Pakistanis). Maybe they are not even looking at Pakistan with much attention, on the contrary, with vermilion rubbed on their foreheads, they are devoted to frenzied religious politics. because.. Because.. They (Indians) are not different from Pakistanis, but are absolutely like them (Pakistanis)).

In these lines, she is not just trying to question the incidents in Pakistan but also relate them to the political atmosphere in India. Riaz highlights the convergence of challenges faced by both nations despite their historical and political differences; the rise of religious extremism, sectarian strife, and a shift from inclusive principles.

Interestingly, Riaz's works can be read in several ways. One can view people's protest against the silences of the state. While hyper-nationalist harangues against the other tend to draw attention away from internal issues, Riaz builds an alternative narrative. In Karachi, in an instance of a blast in mosque in Pakistan, the authorities claim, *"Jab masjid ke andar khoon rezi shuru hui, tab sarkari adaaron ne kaha: "musalman aisa nahin kar sakte, yeh hindu agent hain."* [21]("when bloodshed

[18] Riaz, *Hum Log,* 72.
[19] Riaz, *Hum Log, 281*
[20] Riaz, *Hum Log, 281*
[21] Riaz, *Hum Log, 315*

erupted in the mosque, authorities said, "Muslims can not do this. It must have been 'Hindu' agents (behind the blast.)") This exemplifies how governments avoid accountability for domestic problems by scapegoating other nations and minority groups, especially in order to suppress those who challenge their false narratives.

Conclusion

Hum Log serves as a profound exploration of the shared experiences, struggles, and aspirations of ordinary people across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Through her trilogy, Riaz delves into the socio-political landscapes of these nations, offering a nuanced understanding of historical contexts and contemporary realities. Riaz asks the readers to re-imagine the narrow ethnic, national, and religious identities that mainstream state narratives propagate. By weaving together the stories of diverse characters, Riaz captures the essence of a composite culture, emphasising the interconnectedness of daily identities across borders. In essence, *Hum Log* is not just a literary masterpiece; it is a testament to the resilience of ordinary people and perhaps also a collective quest for justice, dignity, and freedom. In the end, it becomes imperative to repeat the question that she asked at the launch of her trilogy *Hum Log*, *"Hum log kaun hain aur hum logon ne apne saath kya kiya?"*("Who are we and what did we do to ourselves?")

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"Up, Woman!": Locating Female Agency in Lal Ded's *Vakhs* [1]

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Abstract

Poetry has always served as a critical lens through which the complex realities of a society become manifest. This is true for the writings of the female mystic, Lal Ded, whose unique form of four-sentence poems called '*vakhs*' stand as some of the earliest recorded literary expressions in Kashmiri literature, that offer a close insight into the societal arrangements of the medieval period. When read closely, her writings constitute a nuanced critique of the societal norms imposed on women by the patriarchal structures of medieval Kashmir. Using Ranjit Hoskote's translations of Lal Ded's poetry as the primary source, the paper identifies three pivotal junctures through which Lal Ded criticises traditional gender roles and advocates for female agency against the patriarchal constraints of 14th-century Kashmir. These key instances of subversion include Lal Ded's renunciation of her marriage and householding; her pursuit of the Divine and path towards self-discovery, and finally, her practice of asceticism and nudity. Arguing that Lal Ded was able to navigate the confines of medieval patriarchal norms by drawing upon spirituality and mysticism in her poetic compositions, this paper delves into the complex interplay between subjectivity, agency, and structure.

Keywords: *Lal Ded, Vakhs, Female Agency, Feminism, Spirituality*

[1] The phrase "Up, Woman!" has been borrowed from Lal Ded's translated Vakh no. 19 in the book "I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded translated by Ranjit Hoskote (Ranjit Hoskote, trans., *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (New Delhi: Penguin Press, 2013))

Introduction

During a period of immense political turbulence, fervent religious discourse, and sweeping transformations ushered in by syncretic traditions, Lal Ded (c. 1320 – c. 1377), also known as Lalleshwari Devi or Lal-Arifa, stands as a prominent spiritual and literary figure of Kashmiri. She popularised a new form of poetry composed of four lines called *vakh* meaning *vakyas* or sentences, which have survived in the popular Kashmiri consciousness through songs, proverbs, and prayers. These have been considered not only a record of the 14th-century Kashmiri society but also a source of emancipatory ideas.

Given the dearth of written records on Lal Ded, creating a standard biography of her life is challenging. Much of the known accounts of Lal Ded come from oral legends and hagiography written and discovered almost two centuries after her death.[2] Some depict her as a precursor to the Rishi order of Sufism founded by Nund Rishi (c.1377 – c. 1440) while others argue that Lal Ded is better comprehended as part of the lineage of the Kashmiri Shaivic tradition of the 8th century to the 11th century. Yet another perspective aims to subsume her under the *Bhakti* forces that swept the subcontinent from the 14th century to the 16th century. Interestingly, cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote argues that despite Lal Ded's ideas sharing similarities with the Bhakti movement through opposition to Vedic religious hierarchies, her actual practice of spirituality through the *jnana-marg* (path of knowledge) was radically different from the *bhakti-marg* (Bhakti path).[3] Moreover, unlike other Bhakti saints living mostly in communities, Lal Ded, as evident in her poems and legends, appears as a solitary figure, only occasionally engaging with other devotees. Lal is also occasionally placed under the Tantric underground traditions, allegedly engaging in rituals of *Vamachara* or the left-hand path of enlightenment.[4]

Regardless of the exact placement of Lal Ded within these larger traditions, her writings undoubtedly appear as a transgression from the Brahmanic-Vedic hierarchical order. Challenging

[2] The earliest references to Lal Ded include works like *Tadhkirat ul-Arifin, 1587* and *Asrar ul-Akbar, 1654*. In contemporary times, Ranjit Hoskote's translations of the vakhs in the book *"I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded"* is one of the most extensive works on Lal Ded alongside the anthology *"Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint-poetess"* edited by S. S. Toshkhani.

[3] The path of intense and self-dissolving devotion, known as *bhakti-marg*, constitutes just one of the three major approaches to the Divine.. The others include *karma-marg*, emphasising adherence to prescribed ritual forms, and *jnana-marg*, focused on evolved awareness and world-transcending insight. For Lal Ded, awareness of the self through *jnana-marga* was more important than both absolute self-dissolution and stylised ritualistic devotion.

[4] *Vamachara* or the left-hand path of enlightenment was a specific type of Tantric practice that involved routine engagement with elements that were otherwise considered impure or profane in orthodox Brahmanic thought, such as meat, drugs, wine and sexual communion. These were considered vital aids for psycho-spiritual transcendence in the *Vama Marg.*

puritanical ideas and exclusive priestly practices, Lal Ded offers a possibility for spiritual liberation for all those hitherto excluded from the orthodox religious order, particularly women. She occupies a unique position as a woman making unconventional choices, not only within the context of medieval Kashmir but even today many of her practices, such as habitual nudity and renunciation of family, generate discomfort among conservative readers.

However, given the sparse documentation on the lives of medieval Kashmiri women, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which these women actually responded to Lal Ded's philosophies and adopted her teachings in their everyday lives. Moreover, while Lal Ded's actions might initially seem straightforward in their defiance of traditional norms, certain complexities remain in her negotiation with the patriarchal structures of medieval times. Her seemingly radical ideas coexist with moments of apparent conformity, Given this duality in her writings, the paper attempts to offer a more nuanced examination of Lal Ded's engagement with the socio-cultural milieu of her time. While this paper recognises that labelling Lal Ded as "proto-feminist" may be anachronistic, her life and teachings do exhibit elements that resonate with contemporary feminist themes. Her legacy continues to inspire discussions about female agency and autonomy which this paper attempts to highlight.

Renunciation: A Choice or An Obligation?

Whatever little is known of Lal Ded comes primarily from hagiographic accounts of her life as well as her poetry in the form of vakhs. Believed to have been born sometime from 1301 to 1320 to a Kashmiri Pandit family at a place called Pandrethan in Srinagar, there is very little known of Lal Ded's childhood at her natal home.[5] Married at an early age, as was customary for many Brahmin families across medieval Kashmir, historians and hagiographers allege that Lal Ded's married life was no different from other Kashmiri Brahmin women at the time. Her mother-in-law was recorded to be a hostile figure who starved her and spread lies about her infidelity while her husband, at once jealous and suspicious of Lal Ded, was abusive.[6] In the face of such injustices inflicted on her, Lal

[5] Some scholars like B.N. Parimoo allege that a primary reason for her ability to access the realm of spirituality, which was otherwise reserved for men, was due to her engagement in religious rituals, yogic education and spiritual development as a child under her father who himself was considered to be a devout Brahmin. (B. N. Parimoo, *The Ascent of Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla-Ded* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, 1987) ; Others like Michelle V. Roberts however argue that since much of her learning has been in the vernacular Kashmiri language, there is too little evidence to determine the extent of her education of Sanskrit texts. (Michelle Voss Roberts, "Power, Gender, and the Classification of a Kashmir Saiva Mystic." *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 3. (2010): 279-297.)

[6] A well-known story mentions how once her husband, suspecting her of engaging in an extra-marital affair given the long periods for which she meditated by the river, struck at her with force which caused the water jar to shatter upon her head. By some miracle, the water retained the shape of the jar without spilling which indicated her ability to finally achieve a level of spirituality beyond human life. Another story highlighted how her mother-in-law put gravel inside Lal Ded's rice to purposefully torture her.

Ded is celebrated as a beacon of peace and moral resilience given her endurance in putting up with the daily abuses of her conjugal family.[7] Finally, at the age of twenty-six, Lal Ded renounced her marriage, house-holding and all material attachments, and instead adopted her journey as an ascetic. She undertook the life of a mystic, wandering naked from place to place, meditating.

> They lash me with insults, serenade me with curses.
> Their barking means nothing to me.
> Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,
> I couldn't care less. Untouched, I move on.[8]

Lal Ded's renunciation of her household presents a contentious issue. Many historical records reveal the unpopularity of renunciation among male followers of the Kashmiri Shaivic tradition. They mostly functioned as educators, scholars, and writers while still maintaining household lives. *Sannyasa* (renunciation) was not seen as necessary for enlightenment. In such a context, Lal Ded's decision to renounce societal life diverged from the established norms of her era. However, subsequent traditions have attempted to mitigate her challenge to conventional norms by reintegrating Lal Ded into the household system. Michelle Voss Roberts notes how most hagiographers drew a sharp contrast between her marital home as a place of ignorance and her family of origin as one of erudition and devotion. They argue that having been raised in an environment of piety and scholarship in her natal home under her father, Lal Ded could not reconcile with her husband and thus, admonished him, leading to her decision to renounce worldly life shortly after marriage.[9] This view frames Lal Ded's renunciation as an assertion of her agency as a learned Brahmin woman against the influences of ignorance. Yet, this interpretation portrays Lal Ded's decision as a judgment against one impious family rather than a critique of the broader structure limiting women's agency to engage with religion and spirituality. By attributing it solely to particular familial circumstances, hagiographers reinsert her into the patriarchal framework she sought to escape, diminishing female agency and submerging it within the structure she aimed to challenge.

Another interesting perspective is provided by the work of Antoinette DeNapoli who highlights how female ascetics are often forced to make the difficult decision of leaving their homes in pursuit of female power and agency that remains otherwise inaccessible to them within the confines of the

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[7] Neerja Mattoo, "Lal Ded - The Poet Who Gave a Voice to Women." in *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint-Poetess* edited by S. S. Toshkhani, (A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2000), 32 - 38.

[8] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 42.

[9] Roberts, "Power, Gender, and the Classification of a Kashmir Saiva Mystic," 279-297.

family structure.[10] In such a case, Lal Ded's divergence from the conventional path can be interpreted in another light. She may have had no choice but to leave her household. While men enjoyed the privilege of simultaneously fulfilling domestic and spiritual pursuits, domestic obligations and societal limitations inflicted on women pushed Lal Ded to choose between either being a householder or pursuing spirituality. Her choice for the latter meant that she was compelled to renounce her household for the sake of a spiritual journey unburdened by domestic duties, thereby making it difficult to discern whether her decision was truly a personal choice or a forced obligation.

Quest for the Divine and Agency in Servitude

Brahmanical practices have historically upheld a hierarchical system, where a select group of Brahmin male priests harboured the privilege of accessing sacred texts and performing prescribed Sanskritic rituals based on the doctrines of purity and pollution. They effectively excluded a significant portion of society, particularly women. Against the rigidity of these traditions and their dominance over metaphysics and ethics, syncretism emerged as an alternative way for hitherto excluded people to access the spiritual realm.[11] Much in line with syncretic traditions, such as the Bhakti movement, Lal Ded had unapologetically criticised Brahmin orthodoxy, the hierarchised system of knowledge and ritualistic practices.[12] Lal Ded boldly challenged the idea that expertise in religious texts could lead to spiritual liberation. For her, a mere 'prayer from a book' would neither lead one to self-development nor any unity with God.

> Fool, you won't find your way out by praying from a book.
> The perfume on your carcass won't give you a clue.
> Focus on the Self.
> That's the best advice you can get.[13]

[10] Antoinette DeNapoli, "Real Sadhus Sing to God: The Religious Capital of Devotion and Domesticity in the Leadership of Female Renouncers in Rajasthan." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1. (2013): 117-133.

[11] Syncretism, particularly the Bhakti and the Sufi movement, was a collection of regional forces across the Indian subcontinent that introduced new dimensions of social philosophy, metaphysics and aesthetics. It aimed at overturning the established hierarchies of the Vedic traditions and rejected its complex structures of formal worship.

[12] Abandoning the use of Sanskrit, which was long believed to be the *Deva Bhasha* or the 'language of the gods', the Bhakti movement instead popularised the usage of *Loka Bhasha* or the 'language of the people' in their writings and poetry. Thus, through the use of native regional languages in Bhakti compositions, not only was the spiritual realm made more accessible to the common folk but even God himself was brought closer to the people. Now there was no need for a designated priest to mediate between God and the people. One could attain knowledge of the Divine either by oneself or through the guidance of a Spiritual teacher.

[13] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 48.

According to Lal Ded, the public rituals orchestrated by the Brahmin priests that centred around external actions like reciting texts, using fragrances and wearing a thread were superficial and, in her words, "foolish attempts" at attaining spiritual enlightenment. Instead, she passionately advocated for a more inclusive and personal approach to devotion and spiritual liberation. The line, "Focus on the Self," carries great significance for, in my reading, it encourages individuals to turn inward and seek their own spiritual experiences in opposition to the conventional belief that spiritual authority rested solely within the priestly class. It opened up new possibilities for individuals, most notably women, who had previously been marginalised from accessing the spiritual realm, to embark on their path toward liberation and attain knowledge of the truth of God.

Most Brahmanic rituals were puritanical and androcentric in nature. Puritanical, because they maintained strong notions of purity and pollution, strict rules for behaviour and consumption, idealisation of Brahmacharya or celibacy for Brahmin men and maintenance of chastity for upper caste women. Juxtaposed to such a tradition lies the *Kaula Tantric* practices associated with the *Vama-marga* or the left-hand path of enlightenment. For Hostoke, a significant part of Lal Ded's writings makes references to such a tradition.[14] These Tantras were complex and dynamic, transcending binary oppositions like sacred and profane, ascetic and erotic, and festive and melancholic. While these rites may appear as liberating forces beyond the puritanical Brahmanic order, Hoskote notes how they were equally oppressive given their androcentric nature as women were treated as mere instruments for aiding a man's spiritual liberation. A man's sexual union with a woman, or her feminine power *Shakti*, was considered a necessary step in *his* (emphasis mine) practice of *samadhi* or meditation. This dichotomy of a woman being reduced to her procreative function in the Brahmanical traditions on one hand and her being treated as a sexual instrument by the Tantric traditions on the other highlights the lack of agency of women, along with a denial of the possibility of similar female spiritual liberation. In such a context, Lal Ded's poetry appears as a challenge to the operation of this mother/whore dichotomy in medieval Kashmiri society and a strong case for female agency.

> Up, woman! Go make your offering.
> Take wine, meat and a cake fit for the gods.
> If you know the password to the Supreme Place,
> you can reach wisdom by breaking the rules.[15]

[14] The *Kaula* tradition encompasses daily life and mystical practices, embracing a positive approach that views activities such as sexuality, love, social interactions, and artistic pursuits as pathways to spiritual growth. Rather than engaging in complex philosophical debates, Kaula focuses on practical methods for achieving enlightenment. (Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 56.)

[15] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 62.

In this vakh, she calls upon a woman to "make an offering of meat, wine and cake" for the Gods despite these rites being traditionally performed by men. It thus appears as though she calls for a direct challenge to and a transgression of established gender norms of her times. Through the use of vivid imagery and strong metaphors such as "reaching wisdom by breaking the rules" and obtaining the "password to the Supreme Place", Lal Ded makes two-pronged attack against gender norms and the Vedic puritanical rites. While Vedic rites are challenged through an engagement with the 'profane' elements, the androcentric nature of Tantric traditions are also subverted with her call for women to be the conductor of the ritual instead of men. Her poem reads as an assertion that women too can actively seek wisdom and divine knowledge, and thus be the agents of their own lives. I interpret this vakh as not merely act of self-introspection by Lal Ded, but also as a powerful call to action for all women, urging them to exercise their agency and engage in spiritual and transformative practices.

Despite such proto-feminist undertones of Lal Ded's writings and her assertion of agency for women, Roberts argues that the spiritual authority in much of her writings remains masculine, as she states that only the Lord can be considered a "real man".[16] This masculine characterisation of the Divine brings to question the gendered nature of the devotee's connection with God. By simultaneously privileging masculinity on the one hand and emphasizing loyalty and submission to the Divine on the other, it appears as though Lal Ded makes a case for an inevitable submission to masculinity. However, in contrast, Neerja Mattoo's work highlights that much of Lal Ded's conception of God is actually in abstract terms with her deity's attributes being pure sound, represented by *naad*, and pure form, symbolized by *bindu*.[17] Her god is a representation of the union between *Shiva* and *Shakti* - God is 'Transcendent', an abstract entity. Thus, rather than viewing *Shakti,* the feminine principle, as inferior to *Shiva*, the masculine principle, Lal Ded saw both *Shiva* and *Shakti* were integral components of God whose union was equivalent to pure bliss for devotees.

Conversely, Meera Bai, a famous Bhakti poet equally known for her challenge to Brahmanical patriarchy and often compared with Lal Ded, while seeking refuge in the spiritual realm, replicated earthly hierarchies within it. Meera Bai assumed a subordinate role in the spiritual realm in relation to her beloved Krishna, adopting the identity of a devoted servant.[18] As such, Lal Ded's radicalism

[16] There is an oft-seen deliberate devaluation of the "feminine" in the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition. Although there are references to the immense power and influence of *Shakti* or the feminine principle, it remains a force aiding *Shiva's* creations rather than being seen as an equal partner. *Shiva* is treated as the fundamental principle while *Shakti* emanates from him only to be reabsorbed into him in the cosmic dissolution cycle- hence, emerges the androgynous state of *Shiva*. (Roberts, "Power, Gender, and the Classification of a Kashmir Saiva Mystic," 279-297.)

[17] Neerja Mattoo, trans. *The Mystic and the Lyric: Four Women Poets from Kashmir.* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2019), 45.

[18] Rashmi Bhatnagar, Renu Dube and Reena Dube, "Meera's Medieval Lyric Poetry in Post Colonial India: The Rhetorics of Women's Writing in the Dialect as a Secular Practise of Subaltern Coauthorship and Dissent. *Boundary* 2 31, no. 3. (2004), 1-46.

appears to go beyond Meera Bai in transcending gender norms and asserting the non-existence of binaries in her spiritual world - the Supreme Being for her reigned devoid of duality. Lal Ded also argues strongly for the maintenance of one's characteristics and agency, even in servitude: this was evident in her preference for the jnana-marg. In the jnana-marg, the devotee is not merely a passive servant of God but an active agent in the pursuit of divine understanding. This agency is rooted in the belief that individuals possess the capacity to uncover the divine within themselves through introspection and self-realisation.

> I wore myself out, looking for myself.
> No one could have worked harder to break the code.
> I lost myself in myself and found a wine cellar. Nectar, I tell you.
> There were jars and jars of the good stuff, and no one to drink it.[19]

Ramnita S. Sharda offers an interpretation of the above vakh wherein she views Lal Ded as playing a game of hide and seek with her "Self". She points to a difference between the "self" which is the seeker and the true, higher "Self" which is sought. The seeker appears to be exhausted in the constant quest to discover her true Self, which is a reservoir of knowledge. A seeker can achieve enlightenment only when she realises the existence of the potential hidden within herself. This is symbolised by the discovery of the "wine cellar" and "nectar of enlightenment" which, Lal Ded postulates, is potentially available to all individuals, but which only a few committed ones can achieve.[20] Such a statement carries immense power for it universalises access to enlightenment, thereby bringing women into the fold of spiritual liberation.

Women, hitherto confined to the 'private' space of the household or used as mere instruments for a man's liberation, are now active participants embarking on this transformative experience. Given how a majority of her poems appeal to women's active participation in rituals traditionally reserved for men, her writings appear as an important challenge to orthodoxy and a reinterpretation of existing religious and cultural norms.

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[19] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 74.

[20] Ramnita S. Sharda, "Self to Selflessness: Paradox of Identity in the Mystical Vakhs of Lal Ded." *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 7, no. 3. (2019), 481-486.

Nudity, Shame and Ownership of the Body

Brahmanical traditions have long portrayed the ideal image of a Brahmin woman as the embodiment of piety, untainted virtue and purity.[21] In a context where chastity for a Brahmin woman was idealised, Lal Ded's choice to embrace nakedness represents a direct challenge to the established norms and an assertion of the ownership of her own body. A major part of her image as a mystical figure comprises her wandering around the forests of Kashmir naked from head to toe, with her abdomen i.e. '*lal*' hanging over her genital area, hence the name 'Lal Ded'. Thus, she not only appears to redefine the prescribed 'virtues' for a woman but also makes a larger case for rethinking spirituality in general, arguing for the need for a more personal connection with the Divine over outward appearances and societal conventions.

> My Master gave me just one rule:
> Forget the outside, get to the inside of things.
> I, Lalla, took that teaching to heart.
> From that day, I've danced naked.[22]

She uses the phrase "dancing naked" to emphasise her experience of liberation and the intense joy that accompanies the journey of self-discovery. Nakedness here has no connection with shame or anger but rather with the pure ecstasy of spiritual enlightenment. She rejects all notions of bodily shame and even claims that through resilience and discipline, one can rid oneself of the burden of shame that society tries to impose on them.

> The chain of shame will break
> if you steel yourself against jibes and curses.
> The robe of shame will burn away
> if you break in the mustang of your mind.[23]

The vivid imagery of a Brahmin woman like Lal Ded engaged in a naked dance not only triggers a sense of discomfort among traditional hagiographers but even among modern-day conservative readers. This is evident in the way many interpreters and hagiographers try to ease the shock of her naked dance by offering alternative explanations for the same. Bimla Raina, for instance, argues that

[21] The maintenance of a 'pure' lineage and the preservation of family honour were considered the highest virtues for women in Brahminical tradition- they were expected to be physically covered, restricted to the household and adhere to strict codes of conduct.

[22] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 82.

[23] Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded,* 86.

Lal Ded's use of the phrase "dancing naked" *(nangae natsun)* does not mean literal nudity but is a metaphorical explanation of "dancing without anyone's help" *(na-hangai natsun)*. Such an interpretation, while offering valuable insights into Lal Ded's spiritual teachings, has been claimed by Abir Bazaz as a mere fanciful attempt at subverting the discomfort caused among conservative readers by the image of Lal Ded dancing naked.[24]

Yet such resistance by Lal Ded against bodily shame and her assertion of agency through ownership of one's own body is challenged by the well-known story of how once Lal Ded, upon encountering the Sufi saint Sayyid Ali Hamadani ran to hide in a bakery to clothe herself, exclaiming that she "had seen a man". Such a mystical narrative of a *Saiva yogini* submitting herself before a highly revered male Sufi figure only perpetuates conventional standards by depicting an image of a woman becoming ashamed of her nakedness. Even Neerja Mattoo argues that Lal Ded's adoption of nakedness should be seen as a form of transcendence over, rather than an alignment with, the feminine form.[25]

For Lal Ded, spiritual authority could only be attained through the 'masculine' and this may lead to the devaluation or suppression of traditionally feminine qualities, limiting the range of expressions and behaviours deemed appropriate for women, thereby constraining their agency in shaping their identities. Hence, the privileging of the masculine over the feminine is juxtaposed against the arguments highlighting the proto-feminist undertones of her writings. Given these complexities, attempting to delineate a definitive trajectory of Lal Ded's feminist expressions becomes a challenging task. While her poems appear transformative in certain instances, they appear conformist in others.

However, while conducting any literary analysis of a medieval poet such as Lal Ded, it becomes imperative to realise that the present standards of theory, in this case of feminism, cannot be uncritically applied to the past and one must appreciate and reckon with the possibilities of gaps and fallacies. However, to excessively dwell on these gaps rather than appreciating the transformative potential inherent in Lal Ded's vakhs within the specific context of her era, would be unjust. Instead, her writings should be approached with a nuanced understanding, one that acknowledges the challenges of such a retrospective analysis but also that appreciates the distinctive contributions she has made to the literary landscape of her time.

[24] Abir Bazaz. "Dancing Naked: Gender, Trauma and Politics in the Mystical Poetry of Lal Ded." *South Asian Review* 43. (2021): 1-12.

[25] Mattoo, "Lal Ded - The Poet Who Gave a Voice to Women," 32-38.

Resisting Domestication, Celebrating Lal Ded's Legacy

Lal Ded's vakhs bear a profound legacy that transcends the conventional societal norms, standing as a testament to empowerment. It encompasses not only women but resonates with people at large. Her emphasis on forging a personal connection with Divinity, challenging societal prescriptions, and asserting autonomous existence offers an inclusive and emancipatory path to spiritual enrichment. Known for their depth and literary excellence along with empathy for the everyday struggles of Kashmiris, her vakhs not only remain accessible but even celebrated by all, transcending caste, religion, and gender boundaries. Even today, she remains revered in Kashmir regardless of people's religious beliefs or level of education.[26]

Personal anecdotes shared by Professor H. Zaffar and the observations of Richard Temple shed light on the enduring impact of Lal Ded's poetry on the people of Kashmir. Zaffar shares how "despite being an illiterate Kashmiri" his mother often recited vakhs of Lal Ded to him as a child.[27] Similarly, Temple highlights how Lal Ded's vakhs had become a "part of day-to-day conversation in Kashmiri households" and that "her religion was not bookish, but a mix of people, hopes and miseries".[28] Additionally, the acknowledgement of Lal Ded's influence extends beyond mere reverence, manifesting in the artistic and literary legacy of subsequent poets like Roop Bhawani, who openly declared Lal Ded as her guru and acknowledged her debt in both content and form. Thus, Lal Ded's rejection of traditional gender roles and societal expectations makes her a symbol of courage and independence.

However, such radical ideas of Lal Ded have not remained unchallenged by resistance from orthodox forces. Throughout history, traditional hagiographers and writers have attempted to subsume Lal Ded's writings within a traditional patriarchal framework by diluting the revolutionary essence of her vakhs and domesticating her image to fit more conventional expectations. These strategic attempts not only cause a misrepresentation of the rebellious spirit of Lal Ded's ideas but also limit the possibilities for an alternative reading of her vakhs. Given the limited records on the lives of medieval Kashmiri women, determining the extent to which they actually responded to Lal Ded's ideas and actively followed her path is challenging. If mysticism is viewed as a solely private and subjective endeavour, her ideas may appear as a lone voice among the women of medieval Kashmir and her influence as limited. However, drawing from Grace Jantzen's framework for interpreting

[26] Agnieszka Kuszewska, "Lal Ded: Kashmiri rebel saint-poetess and her legacy." *Pakistan Vision* 16, no. 1. (2015), 1-20.

[27] H. Zaffar, Mystical Thought of Kashmir. In *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society, and Polity Edited by NA Khan.* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 71-84.

[28] Richard Carnac Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess: Being the sayings of Lal Ded or Lal Diddi of Kashmir (Granny Lal) (*Cambridge University Press, 1925), 48.

mysticism, Roberts contests such a view and argues for moving beyond the limited understanding of mysticism as a merely personal practice to a political one. By viewing Lal Ded's mystical practices as a political endeavour, there is a potential to view her as a symbol of societal change and resistance to orthodoxy. In a society where women's voices were often silenced and their agency denied, Lal Ded's bold assertion of her spiritual authority and autonomy served as a powerful assertion of women's rights and dignity. Her writings not only offer a powerful critique of attempts at moulding her into a patriarchal narrative but also offer crucial lessons on individual agency against conformity and the transcendence of the limitations imposed by societal expectations. Her vakhs spark thought-provoking discussions on gender, spirituality, and agency, serving as a refuge for the many Kashmiri women today who find themselves at the receiving end of state oppression. Regardless of the complexities in precisely locating female agency in her vakhs, Lal Ded's legacy stands as an enduring symbol of resilience in the face of adversity, a call for a social revolution against orthodoxy.

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The Intersection of Social History and German Expressionism: Exploring the Film Culture of the Weimar Republic

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Abstract

The Weimar Republic, which shaped German politics between the end of World War I and the rise of the Nazi Party in the 1930s, has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the context of its political, economic, and social history. This study posits that an analysis of German expressionist films, produced in the 1920s, offers a valuable framework for understanding the Weimar Republic's social and psychological history. The key question is, to what extent do these films, reaching their artistic zenith in the 1920s, reflect the socio-political turmoil of the Weimar Republic? The paper will employ tools such as film analysis, and a review of existing literature on German Expressionism to address this question. Examining the social context of German Expressionist films provides insight into prevalent themes and aesthetic strategies, prompting an exploration of whether Weimar Republic films' style reflects broader anxieties and discontent within the socio-political framework. By investigating the intersection of social and cinematic history, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the Weimar Republic's social and political atmosphere. The pivotal question is whether it is plausible to discern a direct or linear correlation between the cinematic domain and the turbulent socio-political landscape of the Weimar Republic.

Keywords: German expressionism, film history, Weimar Republic, Second World War

Introduction

On November 1, 1895, Max Skladanowsky and his brother Emil presented a fifteen-minute long set of eight short films in Berlin's Wintergarten Theatre. This was the first time in Europe that a movie was shown to a paid audience, marking the beginning of the history of film in Germany.[1] During the subsequent decades, the art of cinema evolved rapidly and reached unprecedented heights. The Weimar Republic was characterised by extraordinary cinematic creativity and exploration, garnering the moniker "Golden Age of German Cinema."

During this time, a specifically German artistic style called Expressionism gained popularity. Expressionism was an avant-garde movement which began in painting (early 1900s) and was then taken up in architecture, theatre, literature, and finally in German films, starting with Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920). As evident from its name, Expressionism is a highly psychological art form that seeks to convey internal states within the human psyche rather than external occurrences.

Between 1910 and 1920, German cinema experienced remarkable growth, with Babelsberg emerging as the primary production hub, akin to Hollywood.[2] The outbreak of World War I led to the development of protectionist policies such as the prohibition on the import of French films, creating a lucrative market for German producers. To support the war effort, German firms produced patriotic plays and newsreels. Additionally, to gain public support for the war, the German government intervened in the German film industry. General Erich Ludendorff decided to centralise the film industry and solidify the relations between private filmmakers and the government, culminating in the founding of a state cinematic propaganda unit called the UFA or "*Universum-Film AG*" in 1917.[3] Backed by conservative industrial interests, UFA sought control not only of the German market but also the global postwar market.[4] It dominated the domestic film market up until the early 1930s.

[1] Manfred Lichtenstein, "The Brothers Skladanowsky," in *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895-1920*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli, (Edizioni Biblioteca Dell, 1990), 312-325.

[2] Stephen Brockmann, "Early German Film History 1895–1918" in *A Critical History of German Film*, 2nd ed. (Camden House, n.d), 25-26.

[3] General Ludendorff was the leader of German High Command.

[4] Brockmann, "Early German Film History 1895–1918," 54-57.

Image 1: Universum Film Ak

Post-war, the German film industry transitioned from overt militarist propaganda to themes like adventure serials, and profitable pre-war Italian historical epics. In 1919, Erich Pommer took a chance on an unconventional script, leading to the release of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari,* a significant example of German expressionism which caused a sensation in America, France, and other nations. The expressionist period is loosely coterminous with the social and political experiment that was the Weimar Republic (1919-33).[5] The inauguration of the Weimar Republic was marred by the country's loss in World War I, which killed over two million people. Political instability persisted during the era of the Republic with over ten different governments and nine national elections between 1919 and 1933.[6]

Films express psychological dispositions rather than defined credos.[7] Cinema during the Weimar Republic reflected societal change and insecurity. Expressionist films mirrored the uncertainties, plight,

[5] This first German democratic republic ended the Kaiserreich (Empire) that had existed from 1871. (Stephen Brockmann, "Early German Film History 1895–1918: Historical Overview" in *A Critical History of German Film*, NED-New edition., Boydell & Brewer, 2010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt16314jf.5, 13–27.

[6] Brockmann, "Early German Film History 1895–1918: Historical Overview," 47.
The Weimar Republic underwent three phases: 1918 to 1923, marked by the German Empire's fall, abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, establishment of a democratic Republic, and economic challenges (inflation, German currency losing its value); 1924 to 1929, characterised by political and economic stability and economic recovery; and 1929 to 1933, witnessing political and economic anarchy, leading to establishment of Nazi Germany. The Great Depression exacerbated these challenges, resulting in increased unemployment.

[7] Siegfried Kracauer, "Introduction," in *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press eBooks, 2019), 6, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691192086.

hopes, anxieties, and fears after World War I, offering insights into predominant ideologies and psychological disposition.[8]

German expressionism revolutionised the emerging language of film.[9] It was marked by a heavy emphasis on mise-en-scéne and composition. Expressionism represents the stylisation and abstraction of reality through aspects such as unconventional camera angles, subtle camera movement, distinct lighting, use of shadows, artificial and stylised sets reminiscent of living paintings. It is also marked by an overtly theatrical acting style featuring jerky, slow, sinuous movements, and heavy make-up. These techniques aimed to evoke mystery, alienation, discord, and intense emotions. Sets, devoid of realistic features, served as symbolic representations of characters' emotional states. Expressionism remained a dominant characteristic of Weimar Germany's films, showcasing cinema's transformative potential to reinterpret reality.

This paper will use three classic German expressionist films as primary sources, conducting a historical analysis of their background and contents to comprehend the socio-psychological setting of Weimar Germany. By taking *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (depicts the fractured psyche of the people after World War I) and *Metropolis* (a dystopian critique on class division and Industrialisation in 20th century Germany) the study aims to look at two major classics of German Expressionist films, which were well received by both the audience and film scholars. Additionally, the study also includes *Der Letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh) which reflects the disillusionment, loss of identity and dignity in post-war German society.

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari **or The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)**

Image 2: Francis sitting with a fellow inmate in the asylum

[8] Kracauer, *'From Caligari to Hitler'*.

[9] Epitomised by films like Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr, Caligari* (1920), Paul, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Der Letzte Mann* (1924), and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931).

The classic work of German Expressionist cinema, *Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari*, has been acknowledged for its expressionist set designs, meticulous studio designs, photography, interplay of soft and hard lighting techniques, and serious psychological examination. The film employs frame narrative through two stories, the outer tale which is set in an asylum, and the inner tale which is told by a patient named Francis. Francis's unreliable narration, combined with the film's expressionistic style, blurs the lines between reality and delusion.

In the town of Holstenwall, Francis and Alan witness a performance by the enigmatic Caligari and his somnambulist, Cesare. Cesare's eerie prophecy of Alan's death comes to pass, casting suspicion on Caligari. Francis uncovers Caligari's sinister secret, only to find himself confined to an insane asylum. The shocking twist reveals that Francis's narrative is a fabrication, and Caligari is the true mastermind. Any simple interpretation of Caligari's sanity and Francis' insanity as being paralleled by these two endings is undermined by their similarity.[10]

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari is filled with horror and dread in every scene. In one of the early scenes, Caligari arrives at the town hall to ask the town clerk for permission to set up shop at the fairground. The set design itself conveys the official's strength and the supplicant's vulnerability.

The fundamental topic of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, which is intertwined with the themes of paranoia and violence, is the questioning of a neat distinction between sanity and insanity and, consequently, the destabilisation of the very idea of sanity. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and several other Weimar films later depict an aggressive and probably mad authority figure. A second theme, violent and unreasonable authority, is focused on that person. The movie explores this theme in scenes where Caligari is both the oppressed figure, like the overbearing municipal clerk, and the authority figure, as the ominous director of the mad institute.[11]

Siegfried Kracauer in his work, uses *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* as a shining example of German cinema's and subsequently the German nation's failure to fight against unreasonable authority. According to Kracauer, if the movie focused solely on the story of the rebel Francis, it would represent a successful and admirable uprising against the powers which could have been a sign of independence. Kracauer, however, contends that Robert Wiene removed any potential critical thrust the movie might

[10] The final iris concentrating on Caligari casts doubt on Caligari's sanity, weakening the framing story's seeming stability. If there is such a thing as reality at all, it is difficult to tell what is truly "real" in this film.

[11] Brockmann, "*Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari* (1920) *or Film as Hypnosis.*", 63 – 73.

have had against established authority figures by undercutting Francis as the main story's narrator.[12] According to Kracauer, the movie takes the classic German perspective of deferring to authority and refusing to oppose rulers.[13]

Image 3: Caligari at the town hall

Kracauer's interpretation of the film's ending has been criticised for overlooking its complexities, particularly the placement of the seemingly insane Dr. Caligari in a position of authority. Critics argue that this ambiguity is a key element of the film's expressionistic style and contributes to its exploration of themes such as madness and power. Critics argue that Kracauer's analysis fails to adequately consider the film's expressionistic style, reinforces stereotypes about German audiences, and offers a limited perspective on the film's possibilities for interpretation.[14]

Der Letzte Mann **or The Last Laugh (1924)**

Murnau's *Der Letzte Mann* is one of the exceptional films that come under the German Expressionist form of cinema. This film does not follow the basic characteristics of heavy makeup and dystopian sets,

[12] To contradict Janowitz and Kracauer's claims about Wiene, the original screenplay, which reappeared in 1976 and was published in 1995, also had a frame story, even though it was a different one from the one that was ultimately shot.

[13] Siegfried Kracauer, "Caligari," in *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press eBooks, 2019), 61–76. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691192086.

[14] Brockmann, "*Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari* (1920) *or Film as Hypnosis."*, 63 – 73.

rather it has a more realistic take on the costumes, makeup and the set design. Revolving around the experiences of an old man (played by Emil Jannings) who loses his position as a doorman of a big hotel, the film became a global sensation right after its release in 1924.

Image 4: Doorman's neighbours admiring him in his uniform

The hotel doorman, with his semi-military attire, is respected by everyone, including his family, neighbours, and the visitors to the hotel.[15] However, due to his advanced age affecting his ability to assist the hotel's guests, he is replaced by a much younger man, and is demoted to the position of a lavatory attendant. The unchained camera then follows Jannings' character as he descends both physically and socially into the basement washroom.[16] Concealing his demotion, the doorman steals his old uniform and wears it back home, knowing that his social standing depends on his reputation as a well-respected doorman of a major hotel. However, soon a woman from the tenements learns of the Doorman's secret. According to Sabine Hake, "Her shocked reaction, which repeats his initial trauma, and the *schadenfreude*, the proverbial joy in someone else's misfortune, displayed by his neighbours, causes an unexpected break in the narrative."[17]

The film aptly portrays generational conflicts and tensions between pre-war German culture and values and the emerging capitalistic culture of the Weimar era. Emblematic of pre-war militarism and authoritarianism, the Doorman poignantly captures the frustrations of the World War I generation. Resonating with their sympathies, the doorman embodies the spirit of a German-Prussian from that era.

[15] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 76.

[16] Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 210.

[17] Sabine Hake, "Who gets the last laugh? : Old age and generational change in FW Murnau's 'The Last Laugh'" in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*,ed. Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 117.

This generation, marked by war trauma, witnessed a transition from imperial elites to the republic's technocratic class.[18]

Image 5: The change in the state of the doorman as the film progresses

Brockmann asserts that *Der Letzte Mann* addresses the prevalent "social question" in 1920s Germany, highlighting the contrast between the impoverished residents of the tenements and the affluent guests at Hotel Atlantic. The doorman serves as a bridge between these two worlds, with his uniform granting him a distinct status. He moves between two worlds: before his demotion, the porter climbs the staircase in the tenement and bathes in the admiration of his neighbours, but after his demotion he descends the hotel's stairs leading to the washroom as the embodiment of debasement.[19] Upon losing this status, he descends below even his neighbours' standing. The camera's descent into the basement bathroom represents that fall. There the doorman is not just surrounded by human waste; he has himself become human waste.[20] The Doorman's journey captures the postwar experiences, from national trauma to hyperinflation and shifting social norms.

The film encapsulates the era's dual promise of progress and democracy and the onset of aggressive modernisation and its excesses. The doorman's story embodies the dichotomy between the Wilhelmine Empire's authoritarian, militaristic, and structured society and the cold rationality of a capitalist-driven modern society. His struggle with the loss of social status exposes the intricate link between identity and profession, offering a nuanced exploration of identity in a shifting socio-political landscape.[21]

[18] Hake, "Who gets the last laugh?," 128.

[19]Hake, "Who gets the last laugh?," 129.

[20] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 82.

[21] His resistance to ageing also underscores Weimar culture's pervasive cult of youth; Hake, "Who gets the last laugh?," 127.

According to Brockmann, *Der Letzte Mann* also delves into the theme of ritualistic worship of authority. The foundation site of this authority is the uniform, not an individual. The uniform, fetishised and endowed with supernatural significance, possesses an independent life and authority, reducing its wearer to a mere shadow without it.[22] The doorman has a "military bearing" because of his authoritative, elegant imperial-style uniform.[23] He defends the weak (a young bullied child) in his neighbourhood, establishing himself as an authoritative figure. Upon demotion, "when another hotel employee none-too-gently removes the uniform from the ex-doorman's almost paralyzed figure, it is as if he were stripping a man of his identity".[24] Emil Janning's character, resembling a puffed-up member of the defeated Wilhelmine army, reflects Germany's post-World War I loss of pride and authority. The doorman's degradation symbolises the humiliation of Wilhelmine Germany, aligning with the nation's historical trajectory.

Upon the discovery of his secret, the film depicts the world as the former doorman sees it: as a painful, humiliating mess of nasty chatter. This is a great example of Expressionist filmmaking.[25] In another scene, during the wedding celebration for the ex-doorman's niece on the same night as the doorman's demotion, the camera once more starts to look at the world through his eyes. It starts to move erratically, zooming in on various objects; the camera images start to blur, resembling a drunken man's eyesight.[26] Murnau's skilful use of light and dark is prevalent throughout, exemplified in the penultimate scene where the former doorman collapses in the basement washroom. The night watchman's torch here exposes both the literal and metaphorical darkness enveloping the ex-doorman, symbolising social exclusion and the reality that beyond a certain societal threshold, individuals become invisible.[27]

In the film's sole intertitle, the filmmaker feels sorry for the Doorman and gives him a happy ending, despite acknowledging that it is unrealistic. In a farcical turn of events, an American millionaire dies,

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[22] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924), 78-79.

[23] Hake, "Who gets the last laugh?," 127.

[24] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 79.

[25] The film's many technical accomplishments, from the freely moving camera to the use of perspectivism in set design, were quickly incorporated into mainstream practices. (Hake, "Who gets the last laugh?," 115.)

[26] Karl Freund, the cameraman, simply strapped the camera onto his body and then moved around shakily. (Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 81.

[27] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 82.

leaving his fortune to the Doorman. This is a reference to Germany's post-inflation recovery with the help of the American-financed Dawes plan.[28] In the last scene, the Doorman is shown feasting at the same hotel, giving away money to staff members as he leaves. The seemingly merry conclusion is tempered by still present societal disdain and bitterness for the nouveau riche Doorman. Despite enormous wealth, he lacks upper-class grace and refinement, serving as a parody of the 'gauche, nouveau riche bourgeois.'[29] *Der Letzte Mann* illustrates what happens to people from an earlier, slower German order when they are suddenly confronted by the avalanche of metropolitan modernity.

Metropolis **(1927)**

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, a science fiction blockbuster with groundbreaking special effects, was a product of its time. While it wasn't a financial success[30,] it was part of a larger strategy to challenge Hollywood's dominance.[31] The film itself was more a result of rapid technological and scientific advancement than a reflection of it. With the past no longer seen as a reliable predictor, people turned to literature and film to explore the unknown, not because they knew what the future held, but because they no longer believed they could predict it.[32]

Fritz Lang's films frequently deal with broad social problems that affect not just one person but the entire community. Lang is renowned for his choreography of vast crowds of people, which Siegfried Kracauer called the "mass ornament". *Metropolis's* opening sequence perfectly illustrates this: on the right, viewers can see a neatly measured rectangle of people moving in sync. This scene captures the central themes of Lang's film – industrialisation and the reduction of people to inanimate objects. The elite class lives high above in sunshine and never needs to perform physical labour, while the workers reside underneath and operate the machines in *Metropolis.* The film provides a comprehensive portrait of the oppressed populace and their rulers. The machine-like precision of *Metropolis'* opening act, where workers move in synchronised waves, is contrasted by the terrifying mob that breaks out in the second

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[28] Silberman, *German Cinema*, 32.
In German, the letters "AG" mean Aktiengesellschaft (corporation).

[29] Brockmann, "*Der Letzte Mann* (1924)," 82.

[30] Anton Kaes, "Cinema and Modernity: On Fritz Lang's Metropolis," in H*igh and Low Cultures: German Attempts at Mediation, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994), 19–35, 19.

[31] Klaus Kreimeier, *The UFA Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 126.

[32] Brockmann, *"Metropolis (1927) or Technology and Sex."*, 105 – 121.

half of the film. These dramatic shifts mirror the artistic currents of the Weimar Republic. The controlled scenes echo the *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s emphasis on reason and social critique, while the nightmarish chaos plunges us into Expressionism's depths, where distorted forms and emotional extremes reign.[33]

Image 6: Shift change of the workers

In the climactic final scene of *Metropolis*, protagonist Freder (Gustav Fröhlich) engineers a symbolic reconciliation between his father, the influential industrialist Fredersen (Alfred Abel), and Grot (Heinrich George), the foreman representing the working class. This moment marks a profound transformation as the once-depicted human rectangles, symbolising the oppressed workers in a state of immobility and monotony, evolve into a controlled and precisely defined unit. Their synchronised march towards the central gate of the cathedral forms a sharply pointed human triangle, signifying a dynamic and positively directed change—albeit rigorously controlled. These scenes encapsulate the film's three pivotal plot points: first, the complete control exerted over the populace; second, the impending chaos and the dangerous proximity of *Metropolis* to destruction; and finally, the restoration of order under a new and fair system that maintains control.[34]

Social unrest and revolution, embodied by the nefarious character Maria, are interwoven with sexual undertones throughout the narrative. The scene unfolds when Freder witnesses his father embracing the fake Maria, leading to a feverish illness and hallucinations, portraying the potential dangers associated with the act of seeing and the overarching theme of an Oedipal struggle, as suggested by Stephen Jenkins.

[33] Brockmann, *"Metropolis (1927) or Technology and Sex,"* 105 - 121.

[34] Brockmann, *"Metropolis (1927) or Technology and Sex,"* 105 - 121.

The film, according to Gunning and Huyssen, masterfully converts psychoanalytical imagery into visual tropes, intertwining themes of technology and feminine sexuality in the enigmatic character of Maria.[35]

Image 7: Fredersen hugging Fake Maria

Metropolis intricately weaves two plotlines, with the first centring on Maria, embodying Christian and Virgin Mary symbolism, preaching peace to workers like early Christians in catacombs. Freder, son of ruler Joh Fredersen, becomes a modern redeemer, symbolising a unique religious narrative where God is a capitalist, but his son aligns with the proletariat. The crucifixion moment at a giant clock-like machine symbolises collective worker struggles within society's temporal punishment. The second plotline explores Rotwang's Faustian story, residing in an antiquated home in a futuristic Metropolis, symbolising a past-future dichotomy. His alchemical laboratory births a method for flawless human replicas, representing the intersection of tradition and progress. Together, these narratives form a complex tapestry in *Metropolis*.[36]

[35] Stephen Jenkins, "Lang: Fear and Desire," in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look, ed. Jenkins (London: British Film Institute, 1981),* 38–124.

[36] Brockmann, *"Metropolis (1927) or Technology and Sex,"* 105 – 121.

Image 8: Maria preaching to the workers

After watching the film, legendary Spanish filmmaker Luis Bunuel said, "*Metropolis* will fulfil our wildest dreams, and will astound us as the most astonishing book of images it is possible to compose." [37] H. G. Wells despised *Metropolis* ferociously, referring to it as "the silliest film" and asserting that it had "nothing to do with any social or moral issue before the world, or with any that can even conceivably arise." [38]

Metropolis vividly portrays the contrast between the modern city and ancient rituals. Freder's vision of the M-machine as a sacrificial idol, reminiscent of Moloch, symbolises the film's exploration of the duality between technology and the suppressed human psyche. R. L. Rutsky based on his analysis of the film's use of archaic imagery argues that the repression of ancient magical elements by modern technology leads to their inversion, while Ernst Bloch suggests that technology becomes more magical as it advances.[39] On the other hand, Siegfried Kracauer compares Maria's plea for the 'heart' to mediate between 'the hand' and 'the brain' to propaganda used by Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels.[40] The film's ending, with the workers once again regimented under the leadership of Freder, a member of the upper

[37] Luis Buñuel, "Metropolis," in *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 106–7.

[38] H. G. Wells, "Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film," in *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear,* 94–100.

[39] Rutsky, "*The Mediation of Technology and Gender: Metropolis, Nazism, Modernism,"* 18.

[40] Siegfried Kracauer, "The Prostitute and the Adolescent," in *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press eBooks, 2019), 153–64, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691192086.

class, has been interpreted as either perpetuating the status quo or hinting at reconciliation between the classes.

Despite Lang's rejection of the overt political message of the film, elements of his work in *Metropolis* foreshadowed the Nazi use of large crowds, particularly in their choreographed movements. But the film cannot be solely blamed for this, as it does provide insights into the cultural climate that gave rise to the movement. The film's dystopian vision continues to influence our understanding of the future, reminding us of the potential dangers of unchecked technological progress and social inequality.[41]

Conclusion

The innovative German Expressionist film industry, flourishing during the Weimar Republic's social and political upheaval, faced decline due to dynamic audience preferences, economic instability, and ultimately, Nazi suppression. This culminated in the exodus of a number of seasoned filmmakers, marking the movement's demise.

The films examined in this study represent only a small subset of German Expressionist films, and thus, the findings may not be applied to other films or cultural artefacts from the period. It is important to recognise that though these films may resonate with or reflect the contemporary socio-political upheaval, many times these films or their sections may not have been produced with an intention to represent a society in chaos. Films are often dictated and heavily influenced by commercial and aesthetic interests and are products of artistic liberties, creativities, and might not be intentionally or unintentionally associated with any contemporary realities. Despite these limitations, this study highlights the importance of integrating social history with film studies to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the cultural, political, and social context of German Expressionist films in the Weimar Republic.

The study of the themes and motifs of German Expressionist films provides a valuable lens for understanding the Weimar Republic's social and psychological history. Films like *Der Letzte Mann*, *Metropolis*, and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* reveal the anxieties and contradictions of a society undergoing rapid transformation, from the displacement of traditional values and social structures to the emergence of new forms of identity and community in the post-World War I era. These films are not only products of their time but also reflect the complex interplay between culture, politics, and social change. By examining the reception and interpretation of these films, we can gain insights into the

[41] Brockmann, "Metropolis (1927) or Technology and Sex.", 105 – 121.

diverse ways in which different social groups experienced and interpreted the Weimar Republic's social changes.

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Freak Shows: Spectacles of Otherness

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Abstract

This paper explores the wildly popular but inhumane historical experience of freak shows with a special focus on Victorian Britain. The paper examines the historical context, such as the rise of industrial societies, new forms of leisure, changing psyche of the masses, scientific developments and colonisation, which led to the commercialisation of non-normative bodies for public entertainment. It is against this background that binaries were created between 'normal', 'functional' bodies and bodies which were considered 'abnormal', with the latter becoming a spectacle for the public. The paper examines the representations of 'freaks' from the colonised world and analyses the attitudes and responses towards them, that were shaped by broader issues of racism, sexism and ableism.

Keywords: freak shows, entertainment, deformity, popular culture, ableism, racism, sexism.

Introduction

Fascination with the 'unusual' has been an intrinsic part of the human psyche since times immemorial. People who have 'different' bodies have long been a source of wonder and inspiration. Rosemarie Garland Thomson states that "extraordinary bodies" are often viewed as "disruptions in the predictable course of nature" and thus, "have been cause for both anxiety and worship".[1] The depictions of human abnormalities are found in Palaeolithic paintings. Ancient period witnessed sacrifices of the disabled. Aristotle, Cicero, Pliny, Augustine, Bacon, and Montaigne all make reference to the occurrence of unusual bodies in their interpretation of the natural order of things. This idea of difference became more concrete during the late Middle Ages with the beginning of European explorations and the discovery of older cultures as well as new 'species of humans' who were 'uncivilised'.[2] It was this 'lack of civilisation' which deemed them as worthy of being colonised and exploited as labourers, servants, and later, even as objects of entertainment. These developments led to the late nineteenth century witnessing the rise of the display of 'anomalies' for the sake of entrepreneurial profit and mass entertainment in the form of the famed 'freak show'.[3]

The term 'freak' can be traced back to the phrase 'freaks of nature' (used widely from 1880s onwards) which referred to people with physical disabilities or those with abilities to perform acts which were beyond human tolerance of pain or flexibility. Freak shows emerged as a dominating trend in the popular culture of many European countries, but nowhere and at no particular point of time were they more popular than in Britain during the Victorian Era when the country emerged as the first global industrial power.

Origins of Freak Shows

In the nascent stages, these were simple exhibits on streets, pubs, and other public spaces. However, rapid social changes which accompanied industrialisation created a new broad audience of middle class urbanites who had the purchasing power to afford this leisure and wanted some form of entertainment,

[1] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error–A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity" in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland- Thomson (NYU Press, 1996), 1-2.

[2] According to the European perspective, societies not following western norms were not civilised.

[3] Anna Kerchy and Andrea Zittlau, *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and 'Enfreakment'* (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2012), 9.

according to Filip Herza.[4] This, combined with the institutionalisation of the Saturday half-holiday (in England) which gave the working class more time for leisure[5], led to the widespread demand for new forms of popular mass entertainment.[6] Amanda Vickery notes that "staged spectacles" of various kinds flourished in the eighteenth century, which popularly included freak exhibitions.[7] This reflected a time when every aspect of human life had started becoming increasingly commercialised and the urge to create maximum profits led to lack of compassion and respect for the disabled. Consequently, those who were 'different' became mere objects of spectacle.

The rapid developments in transport technologies, like railways and steamships, increased the mobility of the population. Consequently, freak shows flourished as performers from distant regions also began gaining popularity. Hence, the shows drew participation from a large group of performers who came from the Americas, Asia, and Africa. These were locations that sometimes yielded genetic mutations that resulted in anomalous bodies that were unfamiliar, and therefore, intriguing to those of European descent. Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century, the freak show had become a truly international institution.[8]

Social Psyche of the Audience

The adulation for these shows, however, was rooted in a much deeper aspect of the social psyche of the masses. R.G. Thomson points out that "the body under industrialisation began to seem more like an extension of the machine. . .Efficiency, a concept rooted in the mechanical, ascended to prominence as a measurement of bodily value."[9] Therefore, rapid industrialisation led to a growing rift between the 'normal, functional bodies' and the 'disabled, broken' ones.

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[4] Filip Herza, *Freak Shows and the Imaginations of the Collective Body of Nation: Popular Culture in East-Central Europe before WWI*, (PhD diss, Charles-University in Prague, 2016), 2.

[5] Nadja Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, (London: University of California Press, 2010), 5.

[6] Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11.

[7] Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (London and New Haven, Yale, 1998), 64. ; Deborah Simonton, *The Routledge History Of Women In Europe*, (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006), 227.

[8] Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture,* 18.

[9] Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error–A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," 7.

The context of the 19th and the early 20th century freak show culture was also shaped by the rapid success of natural sciences, and by the emergence of racial anthropology, which markedly influenced discourses.[10] The rise of statistical analysis was applied to health and bodies and the idea of the 'normal' man also became prominent during the 19th century, which also contributed to this curiosity towards 'freaks' and 'monstrous' bodies.[11] This period also saw the social application of Charles Darwin's biological theory related to natural selection. Although Darwin, through his work *On the Origin of Species*, had put forth a neutral hypothesis, "describing a biological process and not a social philosophy," the idea of Social Darwinism eventually took strong roots in European public discourse.[12] This implied that the different human races were subject to the laws of natural selection and certain groups were more powerful because of their inherent superiority over those who had 'racially inferior' mental and physical abilities. This provided an easy justification for the treatment of 'freaks' from non-European areas as 'sub-human'.

As the era of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation saw increasing mobility of ideas, these theories became an important part of dialogues and discussions. All of these factors culminated in the creation of a 'European' mentality, which held a specific and quite rigid perception towards the 'other world' (colonised regions) and its people as subservient, whose humiliation was completely legitimate. This psyche was glaringly visible in the prevalence of freak shows, which often fed into the ideas of racial superiority and curiosity of the Victorian masses. The height of the British colonial rule in India also saw the rise in the rage around freak shows. The trans-Atlantic exchanges that culminated in the establishment of colonies solidified the sense of the 'other' and the 'freaks' thus, had to carry the legacy of being colonised and the burden of being othered throughout their careers.

Deformito-Mania: Popularity of Freak Shows

The growing urge to explore 'the horrors that beset mankind' was satisfied through freak shows, culminating in what has often been referred to as "Deformito-Mania."[13] This term was coined by *Punch*,

[10] Herza, *Freak Shows and the Imaginations of the Collective Body of Nation: Popular Culture in East-Central Europe before WWI*, 4.

[11] Maria Rovito, "The Victorian Freak Show and the Spectacle of the Elephant Man" in *MUsings: The Graduate Journal* (Issue: Spring, 2019), 16th April, 2013, 27.

[12] James Allen Roger, "Darwinism and Social Darwinism", in Journal of the History of Ideas, University of Pennsylvania Press, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2014), 3.

[13] Brigham A. Fordham, "Dangerous Bodies: Freak Shows, Expression, and Exploitation," *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, Vol. 14, No. 207, (July 1, 2007), 16.

London's well-known satirical, to classify the growing curiosity of freak performances during the 19th century, articulating that "the taste for the Monstrous seems, at last, to have reached its climax." It acknowledged the vogue of freak shows by describing the psyche of people through the following anecdote: "If Beauty and the Beast should be brought into competition in London, at the present day, Beauty would stand no chance against the Beast in the race for popularity."[14]

Freak shows were the most accessible form of entertainment for the masses, and sometimes offered special discounts to servants and working classes with the aim to attract a wide range of audiences. To establish freak shows as an acceptable form of 'family entertainment', concessions were offered on tickets for children. However, it is important to remember that these shows did not only remain a part of popular culture as there were stagings of private shows as well for middle and upper class audiences. By doing so, exhibitors ensured their elite clientele enjoyed a degree of social segregation while providing inexpensive amusement for the masses.[15] Private viewing rooms 'for ladies only', created sanitised spaces for upper middle-class women to relax and enjoy the spectacle without the fear of male 'pests'.[16] The exhibition of Aztecs as 'freaks' to the monarch, Queen Victoria, gave these shows the ultimate approval of royalty. Subsequently, everyone from the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy to the imperial family became an audience for these 'freaks'. Freak shows were thus one of the few forms of Victorian (and Edwardian) entertainment that explicitly catered to, and succeeded in attracting, an extremely broad audience that cut across lines of class, gender, age, and region.[17]

Categories of 'Freaks'

Kecse Afrodité Vivien notes that 'freaks' with physical disabilities were called "monstrosities" while 'freaks' with special abilities were referred to as "novelty act performers".[18] Barbara Chase-Riboud talks about three types of these individuals: "natural-born freaks" (those who were born with certain physical disabilities), "made freaks" (those who had altered their body voluntarily to make it outlandish) and

[14] *Punch*, Vol 1, September 1841, London,

[15] Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, 22.

[16] Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14. ; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.

[17] Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, 23.

[18] Vivien Afrodité Kecse, *Popular culture in England in the 19th century: Freak Shows*, (Thesis, 13 April 2016), 1.

"fake freaks" (those who faked their disabilities through certain visual tools in order to earn a good profit).[19]

One of the earliest known 'freak' was a woman named Saartjie Baartman from the Khoisan tribe native to Africa, brought to London in 1810 by the British doctor William Dunlop. Nicknamed Hottentot Venus, she was shown under humiliating conditions in marketplaces and circuses until her death.[20] What evoked laughter, surprise and amusement in the public was particularly her buttocks and genitals, perceived as oversized and abnormal.[21] It was not just the woman who was put to display, it was her perceived 'primitivism', and 'unusual' physique which attracted the audience while her 'exotic' body was overtly sexualised. This provides a glaring image of the gendered racism which was visibly present in the undercurrents of the craze for freak shows.[22]

Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon, a renowned French naturalist who was the first to recognise ecological succession, applied the theory of the 'Great Chain of Being' to the African people, propounding the idea that Hottentot was the missing link between the human and the orangutan.[23] An advertisement poster for a show exhibiting her, read the following:

> What is it?...What is it?...Is it an Animal? Is it an Extraordinary FREAK of NATURE? Or, is it a legitimate Member of Nature's Works? Or is it the long sought for LINK between Man and the ORANG-OUTANG, which Naturalists for years decided does exist, but which has hitherto been undiscovered?[24] (cited from a freak show advertisement dated 1844)

Baartman, in her own words, describes how this kind of publicity affected her,

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[19] Barbara Chase-Riboud, *The Hottentot Venus* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 24.

[20] Barbora Putová, *Freak Shows: Otherness Of The Human Body As A Form Of Public Presentation* in *Anthropologie*, (Brno: Anthropos Institute, 2018), 4.

[21] Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error–A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," 12.

[22] Even after her death, two autopsies conducted on her body- by Henri de Blainville in 1816 and by Georges Léopold Chrétien Cuvier (a renowned naturalist) in 1817 were deeply racist in their analyses of her genitalia.

[23] Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, *The Hottentot Venus, Freak Shows And The Neo-Victorian: Rewriting The Identity Of The Sexual Black Body*, (University of Málaga, 2013), 1.

[24] Barnum. Hours of Exhibition, Canning Town (East London), 1844, in BBC History, March 2017.

> I even wondered if their belief was more than half right – that I really mattered less than a camel, less than a dog...that even my shape was not human according to civilised people.[25]

Her account of her shows also gives us an idea of the humiliation which she was subjected to as a 'freak',

> ...being exhibited in an eight-by-twelve-foot bamboo cage just high enough for me to stand and almost naked, shivering in my apron of pearls and feathers, my leggings of dried entrails, my painted face, my leather mask, my dyed and braided hair, my doeskin red gloves, my sheep skin lappa slung over one shoulder, my necklace of shivering glass and shells, my crown of feathers, my cowrie seed earrings, able to stagger only a few paces, or crouch over my brick kiln for warmth, or obey the shouts of my keeper.[26]

Another series of freak shows which gained wide popularity were those displaying the Aztec 'children'. These were actually adults with a congenital disorder, who were purchased and commodified since childhood.[27] Bartola and Maximo, addressed in newspapers through terms like "human monstrosities", were siblings who were microcephalic, implying that they had unusually small heads due to incomplete cerebral development. Individuals with this disability were displayed as 'pinheads'. Due to a limited stage of advancement of their cognitive abilities, it is most likely that the brothers were not capable of giving consent for exhibiting themselves. Thus, what we witness in this case is a systematic and targeted ableism, with abled-bodied people exploiting the existence of individuals with neurological disorders for profit through their displays across Europe and America, along with private exhibits for royalty and scientific societies.

The popularity of Bartola and Maximo was also a consequence of the idea of racial and moral superiority of the Caucasians. Their physical disabilities were projected as racially caused. They were erroneously advertised to be of Aztec origin even though their parents were originally *mulattos* (a person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent). The audience was encouraged to see the disabilities of these two as characteristics of the Aztec race. Their 'unusual' physical appearance was advertised as a characteristic of people of the lost civilisation who were perceived as a "childish race" consisting of "savages". This, in turn, fed the racial complex of the Europeans, fitting well into the widely prevalent ideas of Social Darwinism.

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[25] Chase-Riboud, *The Hottentot Venus*, 24.

[26] Chase-Riboud, *The Hottentot Venus*, 24.

[27] Cassandra Grosh, and Sarah Keck, Isabel Vazquez, "Exhibit or Human?: Analysis on the Life of the Aztec Children in Freak Shows and Human Zoos," *Digital Literature Review*, Issue 3 (2016), 23.

Twin brothers Chang and Eng Bunker started their careers as 'freaks' at the age of eighteen. They were described as having "particularly repelling, yellow in hue" faces, which also allowed them to become profitable as a curiosity at this time.[28] These "Chinese" boys were a pair of conjoined twins from Siam (now Thailand), thus becoming popular as "Siamese Twins". Their unique body conjunction along with racial differences made them hugely popular among the freak show audience as well as physicians and naturalists of the time. Their descriptions were often located within the narrative of Oriental backwardness, with an emphasis on their "dependent" and "childlike" nature.[29] Chang and Eng were thus successfully advertised as "oriental curiosities" and consequently became voiceless victims in an ableist and racially motivated trap of freak shows and medical examinations.

Lalloo, the "Double-Bodied Hindoo Boy", often referred to in medical literature as a "double monstrosity", was a set of conjoined twins from Lucknow. Rather than a fully grown human, the second twin was one with no head and no heart, appeared to be growing out from his chest, and was female (sometimes referred to by the name of Lala). Lalloo was thus a particularly fascinating 'human oddity', as he embodied two characters that were frequently associated with the freak show: he was a conjoined twin and a 'hermaphrodite'; not only was he attached to another body, but also that body was female.[30] On this account, his body triggered the psychological anxieties related to incest as well as child marriage. Apart from this, it is important to note that the term "Hindoo" was not used as a remark of his religious affiliation. Rather, it was a reminder of his racial identity and his inferior status as a colonial subject. So distinctive was his physical appearance that a pamphlet for his exhibition read the following, "£1,000... Challenge to the world! To produce the equal of Laloo, The greatest living wonder in the world! A native of Lucknow, Central India." This appeal of his double body drove the audience in to witness "the place where two people became one."

Conclusion

Freak shows presented a 'different' body that was formed, interpreted and reproduced in the context of unequal power relations; they were a projection area stemming from the power position of the Western

[28] Described as such by their owner Captain Abel Coffin in a letter dated June 28, 1829, written to his wife Susan Coffin. (*The Lives of Chang and Eng*, *Siamese Twins Collection, North Carolina State Archives*) ;
Guy Charles Murrunku Kirkwood, *Performing Freakery: American Freak shows, Popular Culture and Regimes of Normalisation in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (University of Western Australia, 2018), 48.

[29] Kirkwood draws attention to the fact that despite being of a mature age, they were never seen as 'men' and every account or report mentions them as 'boys' or 'youths', with their owner, Abel Coffin, sometimes being projected as a paternal figure.

[30] Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, 16.

man reflecting his fears, fantasies or doubts about the categories of normality and normal identity. These shows also point towards the existence of unequal cultural worlds where display of physical 'abnormalities' and racial differences became a form of entertainment and an intrinsic part of popular culture.

These shows remained a very visible element of popular entertainment as late as the outbreak of the First World War. Freak shows reflected and contributed to the self-definition of the West as racially, culturally and bodily superior to the colonised 'other'. Their inhuman nature and the fact that they were clearly built on a sexist, racist, and ableist thought process was no hindrance in their rising popularity during an era when the human body was becoming an extension of industrial machinery.

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Dichotomy of the Goddess:

The influence of the Partition on the art and the artists of Kumartuli

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Abstract

Kumartuli, which can be translated literally as a locality of potters, is a homogenous caste-based settlement of idol makers in North Kolkata which is deeply enmeshed within the history of the colonial city and its religious and cultural landscape. The neighbourhood of Kumartuli, as an urban centre of art production, establishes an influential position for itself within the physical and cultural fabric of the city, particularly through its association with the autumnal festival of Durga Puja. Despite the homogeneity of caste identity in this neighbourhood, there exist lines of conflict and hostility between the two sections of the *protimashilpis* (idol makers) present in Kumartuli , the *Bangal potti* and *Ghoti potti*, constituted by the artisans from East and West Bengal respectively. During the Partition of India, the immigration of *kumars* (potters) from East Bengal reshaped the social fabric of this area. This paper aims to analyse the evolution of Kumartuli as a site of cultural and artistic production, with special focus on the influence of the Partition of Bengal on the process of community formation. It also attempts to understand how the socio-cultural climate engendered by these processes have shaped the tradition of *protimashilpo* (idol making), and how the art form has come to embody a history of cultural conflict and assimilation.

Keywords: partition, *kumbhakars*, *protimashilpi*, iconography, *Bangal potti*, *Ghoti potti*

Community formation and origins

According to Debapriya Chakrabarti, the formation of Kumartuli lies at the intersection of geographic and spatial factors, social structures and practices and the influence of urbanisation which facilitated its reimagination as a space of cultural production. The location of the potter cluster played a crucial role since the proximity to the river enabled greater convenience in the procurement of raw materials and transportation. Further, at the time of its conception in the late seventeenth century, the potter community clustered near the northern fringes of the Sutanuti village, giving them access to an influential market area and the river trading hub.[1]

Some contemporary kumars, Madhumita Mazumder argues, believed that the pre-1757 *kumbhakars* (potters) came from the Rarh region of Birbhum district.[2] Subsequently, the neighbourhood of the potters emerged based on the traditional habitation concept of *para* and was designated as an administrative area for the homogeneous community belonging to the same occupational *jati* (caste-based occupational group). The caste homogeneity fostered a sense of social cohesion and created a collective identity.[3]

Kumartuli shared close connections with the 'black town' dotted with elite *bonedi bari* families in the colonial period who contributed to the patronage of and demand for the culturally embedded craft of idol making. In the early 1700s, the Bengali *babus* (elites) and middle class celebrated Durga Puja as an expression of opulence to impress the British superiors. It consolidated their position in society and helped maintain their social and political privilege.

Mintu Pal, an idol maker belonging to the Ghoti potti, describes how the of Kumartuli was facilitated by ties of patronage as follows,

> The settlement of Kumartuli is almost 300 years old and was originally called Sutanuti where glass, vessels and pottery were made. It was organised by Raja Nabakrishnadeb of Shobhabajar Rajbari who initiated the practice of Shakti pujo in Bengal. He recruited potters who were under the patronage of Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagar and were renowned for making clay figurines.

The increasing demand encouraged kumbhakars from Krishnanagar and Nadia who produced small and unrefined idols in small-scale household-based industries to migrate to North Kolkata and

[1] Debapriya Chakrabarti, *The Practice of Idol-Making in Kumartuli: Cultural Heritage, Spatial Transformation and Neoliberal Governance in Kolkata* (University of Manchester: Research Explorer, 2020), 101.

[2] MR Mazumdar, *Re-Imagining Kumartuli—The Artisan and the City (*Singapore: Springer, 2021), 43.

[3] Chakrabarti, *The Practice of Idol-Making in Kumartuli,* 102 - 104.

expand their community by drawing in members from surrounding villages. During this period, the process of idol-making was carried out in the *thakurdalans* (courtyard) of the family houses which led to the creation of long-standing patron-client relationships. Gradually, pottery, clay dolls and terracotta crafting which constituted the original occupation of the kumars were transformed into subsidiary businesses.

After the mid-eighteenth century, the ritualistic aspects of the Durga Puja which were primarily confined to the domestic circles of the elite became more democratised. This mass phenomenon was initiated by a group of 12 friends who organised the first *'baroyari pujo'* between 1761 and 1790. Subsequently, baroyari pujas denoted community-sponsored subscription-based participatory pujas. Temporarily constructed pavilions called pandals became spaces for community congregation and worship. Despite the mobilisation of public participation, the practice of Durga Puja largely remained restricted to the upper class. The rise of baroyari pujas, de-centred idol-production from the thakurdalan and shifted it to the workshops of the kumars within their living quarters. This shift gradually gave shape to Kumartuli as an established space of cultural production.

In 1911, the Indian National Congress attempted to use Durga Puja as a tool for the consolidation of nationalist feelings through its rebranding as '*sarbojonin puja*'[4] marked by the inclusion of all castes and classes.[5] According to Mazumder, the democratisation and massification of the festival through the sarbojonin puja consolidated it as an expression of the Bengali Hindu identity.[6] The increase in demand for idols due to this transformation prompted *kumars* to solely engage in the profession of idol-making.[7]

Factors influencing Community Formation

Shoma Choudhury Lahiri discussed the complexities that influenced and gave shape to the newly emerging neighbourhood of Kumartuli in the 18th and 19th centuries. An essential aspect of the caste-based occupational area was the presence of caste capital. The inhabitants of Kumartuli majorly went by the title of *Pals*. Their spatial proximity and kin-based associations through marriage encouraged the sharing of knowledge and material and cultural exchanges. The transformation of relations contingent on neighbourhood, kinship and work into durable obligations helped in the maintenance of quality. The art of idol-making was domestically transmitted through the male line and materialised into a living family tradition based on collectively

[4] The term '*sarbojanin'* in Bengali literally translates to 'for all people'.

[5] Chakrabarti,*The Practice of Idol-Making in Kumartuli,* 111.

[6] Mazumdar, *Re-Imagining Kumartuli—The Artisan and the City*, 45.

[7] Chakrabarti, *The Practice of Idol-Making in Kumartuli,* 111.

owned capital, pride and individual qualities. Patronage through individuals and corporations provided kumars scope for experimentation and in seasons without patronage they cultivated lands given by patrons. The conjunction of caste, lineage and patronage formed the bases of a social capital which gave the kumars of Kumartuli legitimacy, competence and authority in the knowledge of idol-making. With the expansion of social mobility, the caste-based group came to shed its ascriptive characteristics and acquire new ones. Caste-identity became an instrument for expressing and furthering their political ambitions for community development and economic aspirations in the occupational field. This caste capital, Lahiri argues, enables the potters of Kumartuli to retain their hold over as well as diversify the trade of idol-making.

The kumbhakar community also developed internal hierarchisation based on ownership and expertise. At the top of the tier were the *maliks* who were the master craftsmen. They employed workers, and contacted and finalised deals with clubs. The workers were known as *karigars* who were further categorised based on expertise. They migrated from the regions of Nadia, Howrah, Bardhaman and Murshidabad. The relationship between the maliks and the karigaars is marked by several variations. Karigars often functioned independently or were attached to maliks based on remuneration terms. Maliks depended on karigaars for the preparation of provisions and were often threatened when karigaars exchanged classified information. According to Lahiri, these dynamics fostered a sense of both dialectic individualism and collective participation.

The economic foundation of the community was rooted in cost-effective and convenient methods which resulted in the craft practices being embedded within an interactive context. The ecology of life within Kumartuli was characterised by a sense of heritage as it was marked by the involvement of different groups who participated indirectly. The community was, thus, marked by diversity, inequality and contestation which, according to Lahiri, fostered organic dependence, distinctiveness and inclusivity of heritage.[8]

Partition and the Social Fabric of Kumartuli

Migration and Re-organisation

In the wake of the partition of India in 1947, kumars from East Bengal migrated to Kumartuli through prior caste-based connections, seeking refuge from communal violence.[9] These kumars primarily produced pottery and engaged in seasonal idol-making. However, the increase of the Muslim population in East Pakistan caused the demand for idol-making to decline.

[8] Shoma Chaudhary Lahiri*, Performing Tradition, Constructing Heritage: Work, Life and Social Transformation among the Kumbhakars of Kumartuli* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 113-127.

[9] Chakrabarti, *The Practice of Idol-Making in Kumartuli,* 105.

Bhobesh Pal, a third-generation artist, and Bhanu Rudra Pal, a second-generation artist, both belonging to the Bangal potti, recount the experiences of their ancestors during the partition by saying,

> The ancestral home of my family was in Faridpur, Bangladesh. Before partition, my ancestors were engaged in pottery as a year-round occupation. Idol-making was their seasonal occupation. They usually made idols in the thakurdalans of their patron's homes. As communal violence worsened and Hindu-Muslim riots became more widespread in our hometown, my grandfather migrated with his family to Kumartuli.
>
> By 1945, people in East Bengal warned my ancestors that they had to leave and settle in India. We were told that we would not be able to sustain ourselves otherwise because the riots would spread further.

Thus, the East Bengali kumars settled in the southwest corner of Kumartuli. Their migration caused the number of kumars to double and gave rise to a new social structure. Geir Heierstad states that the immigration of kumars from East Bengal reshaped the fabric of Kumartuli along new lines of conflict and hostility.

The kumars from West Bengal, initially, supported the immigrants because of their shared caste locations and raised funds for their benefit. However, despite the social fabric of the neighbourhood being dominated by caste identity, the East and West Bengali kumars distinguished between themselves by drawing on other referents of social identity like territorial affiliation, family units, sectarian networks and economic concerns. This reflected the lack of caste consciousness among the kumars beyond the level of jati. HH Risley points out the existence of approximately 30 subcastes and 30 *gotras* (lineage) within the kumbhakar jati. The inhabitants of Kumartuli, Heierstad suggests, lacked knowledge about these specific subcastes and gotras and largely identified with *Aliman* gotra and the title of *Pal* or *Rudrapal*. The specificities within the caste identity were acknowledged only in the matters of marriage. The kumars practised endogamy and the two groups that emerged based on different ancestral homes were considered to be subcastes who did not marry each other.

As the number of East Bengali kumars increased, the previous inhabitants of the settlement became disturbed by the notion of being reduced to a minority in their locality. This feeling underscored by issues of land, differences in artistic styles and market demands materialised into a sense of hostility and lack of receptiveness between the two groups of the locality.[10]

[10] Geir Heierstad, *Caste, Entrepreneurship and the Illusions of Tradition: Branding the Potters of Kolkata* (Cambridge Core, January 1, 2017), 143.

The conflict over land and the setting up of workshops emerged as one of the central contentions, as has been described by Bhobesh Pal and Bhanu Rudra Pal,

> When my grandfather first arrived in Kumartuli, the *Edeshi* people [kumars who lived in West Bengal prior to partition] were not keen on providing my family with land for resettlement. Later, East Bengali zamindars like Pankaj Ray and K.T. Ray gave us the land which was being used to build a hospital and helped us set up workshops.
>
> After we migrated, the people here raised objections about us making idols in Kumartuli. Few of us had to settle down around Jadavpur. There they had to put up tarps and make idols. However, some people attempted to help us and tried to give us space in the locality where we could work alongside the West Bengali artisans.

Mala Pal, a renowned female artisan belonging to the Ghoti potti, sheds light on the inverse perspective and expresses the frustrations of the Ghoti community when she says,

> After partition, the new migrants, who brought capital they had accumulated in their hometown, started buying and taking away land from the poorer artisans of Ghoti potti. This created a sense of distrust towards them and our people were not interested in mixing with them.

Conflict and its Narratives

The social processes of conflict and integration, in the aftermath of the Partition, within the kumbhakar community can be traced through their influence on the art styles and visual culture of Kumartuli. Most sectarian conflicts in the wake of partition were contextualised as interreligious strife but in the case of Kumartuli, conflict was intra-Hindu and within the same jati of kumbhakars.

The migration of the East Bengal kumars to Kumartuli led to distinct changes in the social structure and process of artistic production. There was a sharp rise in the popularity of these kumars because their works possessed the element of novelty - a development which was not received very well by the kumars of West Bengal. The latter mocked the East Bengal kumars by referring to them as "*Bangals*", who in retaliation portrayed the Edeshis as bad artists with poor work ethics and addictions. The East kumars claim to have helped younger Edeshi kumars progress and taught them proper techniques of idol-making. The competition in the market thus pitted the two art styles against each other, with each community trying to claim superiority for its own tradition.

This is expressed in the way Biplab Pal, the grandson of notable Bangal artist Gorachand Pal, and Bhobesh Pal describe and perceive their art style,

> The Ghoti and Bangal artists often mock each other about their varying styles of idol-making but I firmly believe our style is much more advanced. In fact, most of the renowned artisans of Kolkata are from Bangal potti.
>
> The work of the artists who migrated from East Bengal was of a much higher quality. It received a lot of acclamation and value in the market which further escalated the tensions between the two pottis.

The conflict over resources and markets crucially shaped how the two communities perceived and related to one another. The mutual antagonisms were solidified to the extent that even the word 'bangal' came to carry a derogatory meaning, as has been described by Kalicharan Pal, "The word 'bangal' was used as a way of referring to someone as stupid. During my childhood, we saw people from East Bengal coming here, we used to often sit together and mock them by calling them 'bangal'."

The intra-community conflict escalated to an extent where the West kumars denied the East kumars access to drinking water, with many instances requiring police intervention. The sentiments of animosity between the two groups were mutual but while the East Bengal kumars were more vocal in the expression of their hostility, the hostile feelings of the West Bengal kumars were more private and repressed by a certain sense of shame arising from the cognizance of their own treatment of the former. Thus, the narratives of the East and West Bengal kumars, in this regard, diverge at a crucial point. The Bangals, as the victims of this social alienation, are more ready to acknowledge the nature of the conflict while the accounts of the Ghotis - the perpetrators - are characterised by a perpetual disavowal and a portrayal of much greater inter-group harmony.

Mintu Pal offers his narrative along these lines,

> When the East Bengali artisans arrived, they were not familiar with the customs and traditions of Kumartuli, and struggled to procure raw materials. They tried to learn from the Edeshi artisans and therefore, maintained a cordial relationship with them. The conflicts that occurred in this locality were largely driven by personal hostilities rather than animosities between the communities. The Edeshi shilpis could have easily caused problems for the newcomers and compelled them to settle down in other areas. Instead, they chose to extend their support because the migrants belonged to the same religion and occupational group as them.

After the immigration of the East Bengal kumars, the native kumars of Kumartuli attempted to support them by raising funds within the community because they belonged to the same jati. However, as the East Bengal kumars sought employment in the neighbourhood, the West Bengal

kumars became increasingly hostile and unreceptive. Since the inception of Kumartuli, the West Bengal kumars had shared bonds based on stories, experiences of emigrational labour, strategies of competitions, and working together in their youth. As a result of this, they had pre-existing internal hierarchies, loyalties, and structural and organisational relations. The increase in the number of East Bengal kumars threatened the West Bengal kumars who feared that they would become a minority in their settlement. West Bengal kumars retaliated through insinuations that the East Bengal kumars were not proper image-makers since the tradition of idol-making originated from Krishnanagar. They glorified their contributions of assisting the East Bengal kumars in learning the art of idol-making and accused them of stealing their jobs. They denied the claims made by East Bengal kumars that they too had their own tradition of idol-making.

During the 1950s, the East Bengal kumars established a samiti for the owners of the workshops (*maliks*) which facilitated convenient lines of credit for them. In response, the West Bengal kumars founded a competing *samiti* (collective) for their own community which would provide medical and financial support to the members. These samitis were occasionally joined by members of the opposite group as well, but since these members were in the minority, the decisions of the samiti were largely guided by the majority sentiments.

The relationship between the samitis has been described by Bhobesh Pal, Bhanu Rudra Pal, and Mintu Pal - these descriptions once again contrast the open discontent of the Bangals with the restrained portrayals of the Ghotis,

> By the time we settled in Kumartuli, there was a strong feeling of animosity between the two communities. To address their difficulties in assimilation, the East Bengali artisans formed a samiti. In response, the Edeshi artists organised themselves into a samiti as well. Although over the years the samitis have started working together, an unsaid conflict still persists between the bengals and the Ghotis here. When the samitis were formed, the two sides had a strained relationship. They preferred operating within their circles. The relationship has improved over the years substantially.
>
> The artisans from East Bengals formed a samiti to collectively deal with problems of resettlement. The samitis of the two communities largely worked in collaboration with each other. There was a high degree of interaction between both the groups and conflicts were mostly based on personal differences.

Heierstad contextualises this conflict in terms of the caste ties of the community as well as their shared source of income and clientele. As the East Bengal kumars began to displace the relatively poorer West Bengalis by buying land from them, the latter began to perceive the former as threats

and aliens encroaching upon their homes and livelihoods. In these circumstances, the need to maintain their monopoly over the idol-making market took precedence for the West Bengalis over their attachment to caste loyalties. The kumbhakars from West Bengal shared commonalities based on their traditional reputation in giving shape to the practice of image-making and the self-understanding of kumars on the basis of their *adibari* (ancestral home). Thus, in Kumartuli, the processes of conflict were intrinsically linked to the social structuring and communal self-understanding based on shared territorial background rather than ties fostered along the lines of caste.[11]

Comparative Analysis of Art Styles

The icon of the goddess and its conceptualization in the religio-cultural matrix of Bengal can be analysed as a product of the historical processes of the region. The visualisation of the goddess was deeply influenced by the historical and political contexts of colonial rule, the nationalist movement, and the partition, as well as the social process of Durga Puja becoming a popular, democratised phenomenon. These changes in the visual culture are most evident in the diverse trends and art styles of the idol-making tradition of Kumartuli.

The two predominant artistic styles of idol-making in Kumartuli are known as the *Khas Bangla* style, characterised by elongated eyes and a sharp, angular facial structure, and the *Dobhasi* style, marked by a more anthropomorphic figure with broader eyes and a fuller face.[12] The iconography of the Khas Bangla style was based on the Bengali aesthetic standards of an ideal female form which came to define the traditional *Sabeki* style of Kumartuli – rounded betel-leaf like facial structure (*pan-pata*), elongated lid less eyes (*tana-tana chokh*), thick eyebrows, square chin (*chouka-thuthni*), and a sharp nose (*tikolo-naak*).[13] The Khas Bangla and Dobhasi styles came to represent the visualisation of the West and East Bengali artisans respectively. The contrast between the styles has been illustrated by Mintu Pal,

> The idols made by Edeshi artists tend to be more model-like. This style draws on clay figurines which were a popular aspect of the Krishnagar *gharana* (school). In contrast, East Bengali artisans represent the goddess with a rounder face and heavier build. Thus, the Edeshi face can be best understood in terms of resembling the 'Sabeki' or the 'Khas Bangla'

[11] Heierstad, *Caste, Entrepreneurship and the Illusions of Tradition: Branding the Potters of Kolkata,* p. 144-145.

[12] Mrinmoyee Deb, *Manifestation of Icon in the Idol of Goddess Durga in Bengal during the Pre-Independent and Post-Independent Period* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 93-94.

[13] Soujit Das, *In Search of the Prototype: An Art Historical Enquiry into the Evolving Form of Pratimas in Kumartuli, West Bengal (Singapore: Springer, 2021),* 142.

> style. The Edeshi face is of a much more *adhunik* (modern) style and it shares similarities with what is called the Dobhashi face.

The two styles also differ significantly in the ornamentation of the idol. Mintu Pal and Biplab Pal compare and contrast the two and say,

> When Kumartuli was first established, artisans from Nadia and Krishnagar had popularised the use of clay and paint for the decoration of idols. Idols with such decoration used to be very popular in the market. Subsequently, after partition, other ways of decoration which utilised materials like *shaaj, daak* and *zari* were introduced by the artisans from East Bengal.
>
> The style of idol-making and the anatomical structure used by us for making idols differ substantially from the style produced by the Ghoti potti. The artisans who are originally from Krishnanagar usually construct idols such that their faces are smaller in proportion to their bodies. Edeshi artisans believe that this type of structure looks nicer when it is adorned with saree and jewellery. The idols produced by Bangal artists are made following accurate human anatomy. Further, Bangal idol-makers like my grandfather, Gorachand Pal, revolutionised idol-making by introducing a new type of posture for the goddess, making components like hair and eyelashes, and decorating idols with ornaments made of *chumki* (sequins) and zari.

These divergent iconographies can be understood through the difference in the way the goddess was perceived by both communities. The difference in the conceptualizations has been elaborated upon by Narayan Pal, son of acclaimed artist Rakhal Pal from the Bangal potti, and Kalicharan Pal,

> In our potti, we dress up the goddess like she is the wife of a zamindari household. We adorn her in heavier jewels and fabrics. The style of decoration in the Ghoti potti is much simpler as compared to us.
>
> I believe people from different backgrounds interpret and present art in various ways. When the artists from East Bengal migrated here, they put forward a reflection of their way of life, dressing and decoration through their idols. The idols made by artists from East Bengal tend to have a 'maternal structure' and a heavier build. In contrast, the idols we make here tend to resemble clay figurines of Krishnanagar and have a more modern style. East Bengali idols have a certain sense of maternal divinity.

For the *Bangal* artisan, the prototype of the goddess reflected the traditional notion of beauty for a married woman in a bonedi bari.[14] Thus, the construction of the goddess was shaped by the image of the maternal figure in a zamindari family. On the other hand, the Ghoti image of the goddess was

[14] Lopamudra Maitra, *Kumartuli : Surviving Oral Traditions through Changes* (2013), 26.

mediated by an inherited tradition of modelling with its own rules and formalisms. This contrasts a style based on expressionism with a style rooted in tradition.

Conclusion

Kumartuli, as a site of cultural production and articulation of identities, claims centrality in the social fabric of the city through its long history of association with the phenomenon of Durga Puja. This community of kumbhakars was constituted and integrated through complex ties of kin and caste-based relationships and patronage in the 18th century. Since then, the composition of the community has been reorganised giving rise to new internal hierarchisations and oppositions. One of the central conflicts has been engendered by the process of migration in the aftermath of the partition and the competition it created in terms of access to resources and market monopolies. This conflict is conceptualised and narrated differently through the lens of the Bangal and the Ghoti artisans, the displaced interlopers and the disgruntled native settlers. While Bangal artisans tend to express their discontent by reiterating their experiences of social exclusion and asserting the superiority of their art, Ghoti artisans undermine these antagonisms and disacknowledge their role in its inception. This opposition, initially organised around territorial ties, has crystallised in the differing styles of protimashilpo. The Bangal artistic tradition has visualised the image of the goddess in a more humanised and emotive form, drawing upon the image of prosperity and maternity they had observed in the zamindar households where they sculpted idols prior to the partition. Juxtaposed to this, the Ghoti style has emphasised tradition and formalism, derived from their ancestral Krishnagar gharana over anthropomorphic conceptualizations of the goddess. The antagonisms between the two pottis has, thus, been transmuted into a dichotomy of the goddess.

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Ordering the Colonial Household: *Memsahibs*, the household, and the British Indian Empire

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Abstract

In the 19th and 20th centuries, several 'manuals' emerged to aid the wives of colonial officers in India in household management, since most of them came to India as housewives at a young age. I have examined three of those manuals here, which were published in multiple editions and extremely popular. These are *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook, A Guide to Indian Household Management and The Englishwoman in India.* I have explored the gender roles these manuals prescribed and how they conceded that they could not always be followed. Additionally, I have explored how the imperial empire building exercise was expected to be carried out inside the household, through an ordering of the household, training of servants and through a pervasive distance from the 'Oriental Other.'

Keywords: household, domesticity, labour, colonialism, ideologies, alienation

Introduction

Maud Diver, an English author who lived in British India during the late nineteenth century asks, "What would India be without England, and what would the British Empire be without Englishwomen? .... with willing sacrifice, she holds the standard of the King-emperor."[1]

The expansion of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century required the employment of an increasing number of Englishmen as military personnel, soldiers, administrators, and missionaries to run the imperial services. There was also a simultaneous influx of women who accompanied their husbands to the Indian subcontinent. These women, often very young, were familiarised with their primary function, which was the establishment of an ideal household, in accordance with the domestic ideals of industrial Europe where a typical middle-class woman remained confined to the domestic sphere as the "spiritual and moral force in the family."[2]

Cookbooks and instructional manuals became the tool to train young girls and transform them into *memsahibs* (mistresses of the house). One such book is the *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook: Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants, The General Management of the House and Practical Recipes for Cooking in all its Branches* which was written by F. A. Steel and G. Gardiner, both 'memsahibs' who had had considerable experience living in the subcontinent. The immense popularity of the text is evident from the multiple editions continuously published, between 1888 and 1909, and the interaction of the authors with the letters sent by their readers.

I have examined certain portions of the book, along with two other manuals of this kind, namely *The Englishwoman in India* and *A Guide to Indian Household Management*, with an attempt to analyse the gendered division of roles, normalised, propagated and disseminated through literature. I will also examine the treatment of India, and specifically, Indian servants in the household to argue that the ideologies instrumental in running the British Raj were upheld and deployed within households as well. While scholars argue that the aspirational ideals in the book would be more closely followed by the British in the colonies since they were a very significant point of reference for upholding British culture,

[1] Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1909), 4.

[2] Pamela Pilbeam, "Bourgeois Society" in *A Companion to 19th century Europe 1789-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 91.

in an area distant from the metropole as well as isolated from their family support systems, we have to keep in mind that the 'ideal' described in the manuals is essentially prescriptive.[3]

Gendered division of labour in the Household

The noted historian of colonial India, Thomas Metcalf, stated,

> Caught between masculine assertion and feminine modesty, between identification with English men and with Indian women, the English woman, within the private sphere she presided over, bore the unenviable responsibility — what one may call the 'white woman's burden' — of both representing the virtues of domesticity and extending the authority of the Raj.[4]

The authors of the *Complete Housekeeper and Cook,* generously dedicate their text to "The English Girls to whom Fate may assign the task of being house-mothers in our Eastern Empire." There is a reference to the continued call for the book, underlining its immense popularity amongst these 'house-mothers.' True to their word to guide to the general management of the household, the authors cover a wide range of topics, from ideal lodgings and categorising servants based on geographical location to providing advice on how the mistress of the house should manage servants. This included the provision of a detailed budget, and other prescriptions for monitoring the household. The authors lay emphasis on the fact that in the household lies the "natural outlet for most of the talent peculiar to women" and "... the 'modern woman', should be nonetheless efficient in the management..."

Diver, in fact, divided the role of the memsahib at home into wife, mother, hostess and housekeeper. Domesticating the empire to provide 'natural homes' for the colonists became essential to legitimize colonialism.[5]

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[3] Cecila Y. Leong-Salobir, *Spreading the Word using Cookbooks and Colonial Memoirs to examine the foodways of British colonials in Asia, 1850-1900* (University of Wollongong, 2015), 8.

[4] Thomas Metcalf, *New Cambridge History of India: Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

[5] Alison Blunt, *Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925* (The Royal Geographical Society, 1999), 422.

In much of the historiography on memsahibs in India, they have been depicted as frivolous creatures, flitting from one garden party to another, lazing away in the hills for months on end while their husbands worked.[6] This extract, from Rudyard Kipling's work, suggests a similar sentiment.

> Jack's own Jill goes up the hill
> Of Murree or Chakrata
> Jack remains, and dies in the plains
> And Jill remarries soon after.[7]

Scholars like Percival Spear have blamed British housewives for widening the gap between the coloniser and the colonised, while Dennis Kincaid and Suresh Ghosh have primarily referred to them as husband hunters and party hostesses. The domestic role of the Anglo-Indian housewife, however, and her importance in establishing the legitimacy of the British household in India have been emphasised in recent historiography by Veronica Bamfield, Patt Barr and Nupur Chaudhri. *The Englishwoman in India* strongly sympathises with its protagonist, condemning those in England who looked down on them as frivolous women, who whiled away their time in leisurely pursuits.[8]

Texts like these seem to show us exactly what would be expected of these young 'house-mothers.' In an industrialised Europe, and as its image in India, the apparent functional divide between the public and private sphere ensured that the concept of managing the domestic space was gendered, just as domestic labour still exists socially as a gendered category).[9] Steel and Gardiner echo this argument as they see the home as a "unit of civilisation where…can learn their several duties." The domestic role of the memsahib assumed even more urgency when her authority over the British Indian household was poised to project her 'pure' image as a contrast to the supposed 'immodest' Indian women encapsulating the idea of the masculinised English *sahib* (gentleman officer) versus the 'feminised' Indian men and a 'superior' Western civilisation over the 'feminised' Orient.[10]

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[6] Nupur Chaudhri, *Motherhood in 19th Century Colonial India* (Indiana University Press, 1988), 518.

[7] Rudyard Kipling, *Nursery Rhymes for Little Anglo-Indians* (Echoes by Two Writers, 1884), 5071.

[8] FA Steel and G Gardiner, *The Complete Housekeeper and Cook* (London: Heineman, 1909), 17.

[9] Kumkum Sangari, "The Amenities of Domestic Life: Questions on Labour" Social *Scientist* (1993), 3.

[10] Metcalf, *The New Cambridge History of India: Ideologies of the Raj,* 98-101.

Ideally, the memsahibs would have to balance a household with both 'brain and heart,' and perform multiple tasks, including maintaining provisions, giving meticulous orders to servants, and thoroughly inspecting the premises so that everything is tidy and orderly. She should maintain a firm hold on her servants, especially by maintaining detailed monthly accounts, as "the mistress of the house has it in her power to make doubts, as to prevent them."[11]

In an alien land, where women often suffered from a lack of familiar companionship and struggled with pregnancy, birth and motherhood, the book provided the guidelines for the tasks expected of them including nursing and dealing with young children.[12] Aside from that, knowledge of everything that would keep the household functioning efficiently would be considered important. There are elaborate notes on the management of dairy, poultry, and instructions for the administration of medicines and for making tinctures, medicinal liquors solutions etc., especially for attending to the household during cholera and malaria epidemics.

Aside from her everyday duties, in a setting where the social status of women depended on her husband's occupation, she was supposed to augment the status by attending official dinners, receptions, et cetera and host her husband's friends, representing a British home in an alien land, a significant task in her limited role in the 'public sphere'.[13] I would like to argue that these 'frivolities' were (ideally, at least) intrinsically tied to their duties to establish homes and maintain community relations. Authors put down in great detail the etiquette to be followed by the mistress of the house, and by extension, the servants under her, to host social gatherings, tennis parties and big dinners, saying that "every Anglo-Indian wife is of necessity a hostess also in her own degree...the distinguishing feature of the country."[14]

The prescriptive gendering of the household and the simultaneous difference in the sphere of activity of the Anglo-Indian memsahib is easily visible. Eliot James stated that "the stable may seem outside the domain of the mistress, but as a matter of fact, so many Englishmen in India are overbusy, that, unless the mistress keeps an eye on the horses, the animals are apt to be neglected."[15] This also provides insight into the tasks Englishwomen would partake in, despite the tasks ideally not being in their domain of

[11] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Housekeeper and Cook*, 7.

[12] Chaudhri, *Motherhood in 19th century Colonial India*, 521.

[13] Chaudhri, *Motherhood in 19th century Colonial India*, 520.

[14] Maud, The Englishwoman in India, 48.

[15] Eliot James, *A Guide to Indian Household Management (*London: Ward, Lock and Co.,1882), 8.

expertise which are undertaken in the guise of the 'house-mother' extending her kindly care to all creatures within her household. Thus, they would be required to adhere to the norms of British domesticity and uphold English culture in the colonial state, through their support for their husbands as "the woman who is a born helpmate...to the man she loves." Their duties as housekeepers and as mothers, constantly aware of dirt and *dastur* (custom), ensured their good health and that their children received an appropriate English education through English nurses and British schools.[16]

The Colonial Ordering Effort in the Household Space

An excerpt from Steel and Gardiner's book notes, "We do not wish to advocate an unholy haughtiness; but an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire."[17]

Scholars have argued that the British never evaluated India under a coherent set of ideas, but sustained the imperial enterprise through a mixture of two ideals of similarity and of difference. In their effort to emphasise the differences they had with Indians or to transform Indians into an image of the British, they shaped their policies.[18] I will argue that these ideologies were implemented and upheld in the household, through an analysis of this text.

It becomes apparent at the beginning of the text that the difference between Indian servants and the British mistress is emphasised, especially by how ineffectual and submissive they were.[19,] For instance, an excerpt states that "The Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily,...but a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt".[20] This difference usually manifests throughout the text as a contrast between the

[16] Diver, *The Englishwoman in India,* 39.

[17] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Housekeeper and Cook*, 3.

[18] Metcalf, *The New Cambridge History of India*: *Ideologies of the Raj,* 100.

[19] In several instances, the differences between British and Indian servants are also emphasised — 'The Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily, and is guiltless of the sniffiness with which Mary Jane receives suggestions;' (Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 45.)

[20] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Housekeeper and Cook,* 45.

centuries of uncleanliness, 'barbarities' practised by Indian servants and the meticulous hygiene of English households, which would be enforced by the 'house-mothers'.[21]

The text divides the duties of servants, according to jobs prevalent in different areas in the country — the *khitmutgar* (head waiter at a table), *khansamah* (housekeeper and head waiter), *musolchi* (scullery man), *ayah* (nurse and lady maid) *and dhobi* (washerman) and seldom kept servants such as grasscutters, gardeners and *gowallahs* (cow herders). The authors describe these servants as educated in *dustoor* (custom) and without exception, ignorant of things known even to an English child and have to be dealt with "autocratic high-handedness." The mistress, thus, should inspect every inch of her house every day, including the compound, the stables, and fowl-houses, overcoming her disgust of things like "seeing the khitmutgar using his toes as an efficient toast-rack...or...seeing the soup strained through a greasy turban" in order to ensure "smooth working, quick ordering and subsequent peace to the mistress".[22]

According to the authors, to ensure the well-being of the colonial officer, "the breadwinner who requires blood-forming nourishment," the mistress should begin her inspection immediately after breakfast. She should be mindful of stale or unwholesome food, apparently a common occurrence at Indian breakfast tables and strive to prevent dirt and diseases, by inspecting rooms and household vessels.

Scholars researching the British Indian education system have said although initially, traditional knowledge was cultivated as Indians were needed to assist in governing the country, the nature of education changed with the emergence of utilitarianism and liberalism. The Anglicists, who encouraged English education, realised that it would encourage a positive relationship between the rulers and the ruled and would create a class of persons who were "Indian in blood and colour but English in their tastes, morals and intellect" a form of cultural conquest.[23] This was often understood as a vehicle of 'civilisation,' almost represented singularly by contemporary British culture. The mistress was expected to train the servants to meet British standards, often through a system of rewards and punishments, "To show what absolute children Indian servants are, the same author has for years adopted castor oil as an ultimatum...until they are educated into some sense of duty."[24]

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[21] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Housekeeper and Cook,* 45.

[22] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook,* 2.

[23] Aparna Basu, *Indian Higher Education: Colonialism and Beyond* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands,1989), 6.

[24] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 3.

The mistress must ensure that the housekeeping is run along similar lines, as it is practised in England, leading by example as a proper British mistress, she should be punctual, methodical, and tidy as "an untidy mistress invariably has untidy, a weak one, idle servants."[25]
The 'liberal' enterprise of the British empire in the nineteenth century embarked on 'improving' Indian society by transplanting British institutions including legal codes and education systems onto the Indian context, despite maintaining a staunch notion of difference and British superiority. The authors suggest a 'combined effort' for running the house as "if Indian servants found cleanliness necessary in every service they undertook, the present abomination would soon disappear, for they are naturally obedient." The task of 'improving' the very nature of Indian servants that the mistress undertakes in the household is apparent, as they say that (memsahibs), "Leading by example, train the servants through instructions, reprimands or the occasional *buksheesh* (tip)."

English authors who are quite sympathetic to Indian servants and acknowledge their importance also acknowledge the racism rampant in British circles, "…. the native race are grossly belied…You will be told that they are all thieves, that they speak the truth only by accident…take them with a grain of salt."[26]

Initially, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British categorised the population of India by several classificatory systems including caste, occupation, and religion, ultimately attempting a 'scientific' classification of Indian society drawn from local knowledge from extensive tours conducted by Englishmen like Francis Buchanan. Only in the late eighteenth centuries would distinct characteristics for Hindu and Muslim communities would emerge. There is an attempt at categorising servants according to their occupations and religion, evident by excerpts such as, "The difference is greater than it seems on paper; for while the bearer is invariably a Hindu, the butlers are Christians or Mahomedans"[27].

Orientalists like Robert Orme classified Muslims as violent, and 'masculine,' while Hindus were indolent, passive and 'effeminate.' Muslims were often characterised as aggressive, hostile, and despotic by the officials of the Empire, a sentiment that seemed to be echoed in the British households. Mistresses are advised to be aware of these ideas, shown by statements such as

[25] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 5.

[26] James, *A Guide to Indian Household Management*, 46.

[27] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook,* 56.

> .... much of this is, of course, due to heredity, all Mahomedans of the lower classes being apparently blind to dirt; dirty habits thus grow unchecked by the mistress' eye, whatever may have been his training in the past, the mistress should insist on her *khidmatgar* washing up...[28], and
>
> Unless you can get a woman from a regular ayah's family, the Mahomedan ones are apt to be a nuisance ...most of them cannot afford to pay for a cleanser and so, learn to live on contentedly in dirt.[29]

These clearly show the categories of the empire carefully preserved in the household, which become extremely apparent when a vice is said to be a rule- "it must not be forgotten that the Mahomedan men-servants as a rule, have no shame, and will say anything."[30] Several authors of household guides also express genuine sensitivity to the prevalent treatment meted out to servants due to their difference. Despite talking about 'the native's usual...manner' (the difference never really goes away), James talks about the need to treat Indian servants with respect, — "Treat your servants as fellow-creatures, not as "nigs" —- a term too often applied, ...show that, though of a different race and colour, you do not senselessly despise them on that account, but have sympathy with them...."[31]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes apparent that there was a gendered division of labour in the British imperial enterprise in India. The 'house-mothers' exclusively held up (or, were expected to hold up) the functioning of the household, 'the private sphere,' in accordance with the ideals of post-industrial England, establishing a legitimacy for the British household in India. They were also expected to ensure the nourishment, health and happiness of their husbands who pursued the colonial effort in the 'public space'.

The household, furthermore, could also be seen as an extension of the colonial effort in public. The colonial public and private intersect where the servants trained by the acquired 'autocratic high handedness' of the Englishwomen were meant to address the 'inherently inferior' traits (which were often seen to be intrinsic to certain communities or castes) and transform the servants into workers

[28] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook,* 73.

[29] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook,* 54.

[30] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 54.

[31] James, *A Guide to Indian Household Management,* 43.

worthy of maintaining a British household. These manuals claimed to provide the memsahib with the means to sustain what they thought were civilisation, British standards, and key British cultural values in the face of colonial disorder. They also meant to uphold the notion of a systemic difference that would, in the absence of the constant watchful eye of the English gentlewomen, transform the orderly British household (and the empire) into a chaotic one.

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Reflections of an Empire: An Exploration of the British Female Perceptions of Indian Culture and Society in Colonial Archives (1764 - 1884)

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Abstract

The British Raj's many distinct phases of socio-cultural evolution saw the complex relations with its Indian 'subjects' change, often reflecting a transformation in the wider geographical understanding of the subcontinent's diverse experiences. The increasing heaps of literature documented this process, from dramatised travel accounts, candid letters, published diaries, and journal entries. A pivotal role was played by *memsahibs* (a married white woman), whose curiosity for the exotic 'other' and longing for adventure often shaped the perceptions of the larger audience at home in Britain. While this paper pieces together the vivid narratives of this unique 'female gaze' in the subcontinent at the cusp of metamorphosis, the primary aim of this paper is to humanise these women by challenging their classic portrayal as villainous caricatures. This will be done simultaneously while examining their dual roles as victims of Georgian/Victorian sensibilities and as perpetrators of the same, within the precarious intersections of race and gender. Thus, this paper will explore the argument of British women as "colonised by gender, but colonisers by race,". For this particular paper, primary texts written by the following authors have been studied: Jemima Kindersley, Eliza Fay, Emily Eden, and Constance G. Cumming (in order of chronology).

Keywords: travel writing, gender, memsahibs, coloniality, Raj, imperialism

Introduction

In her work, *'Up the Country'*, Emily Eden, the niece of Governor-General Minto, wrote to her nephew, William Osborne about her mixed feelings for a bygone era. Eden wrote rather nostalgically of the once "innocent" India being transformed into an industrial, materialistic entity, not unlike the part of the world she came from,

> The Kootûb will probably become a Railway Station; the Taj will, of course, under the sway of an Agra Company (Limited, except for destruction), be bought up for a monster hotel; and the Governor-General will dwindle into a first-class passenger with a carpet-bag.....these contrasts of public grandeur and private discomfort will probably be seen no more, on a scale of such magnitude.[1]

An in-depth analysis of the implications of Eden's writing reverberates further when one considers the significance of travel writing as it existed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Jan Borm has argued that travel accounts present a unique combination of non-fiction, informative writing, and gripping narrative building.[2] This hybridity of fact and fiction is focused on delivering an imitation of the 'real world,' from the writer's perspective. This action then blurs the distinction between the writer and the subject that is written about, with the author acting as no less an object of study than the landscape she studies. It is the author's perceptions of her context that enables the reader to catch a glimpse not only of the outer world described alone but also of the inner world of the author. This is because it is through the 'inner world' lens that she describes the 'other', outer world. This led Borm to conclude that travel is also 'self-fashioning'.

What then, does Eden's work draw our attention to? I will attempt to explain it as a picture of the Raj's self-perceptions, from the gaze of female judgement.[3] This is decipherable in two aspects. First was the perception of India as the 'innocent' other-worldly paradise based on 'primitive religion', juxtaposed with the 'civilised' West.[4] This argument for nostalgia draws its foundation from the perceptions of the 'innocent savagery' of Indians. Eden further wrote in her published

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[1] Emily Eden, *Up the Country*: *Letters Written to Her Sister From the Upper Provinces of India* (London: Richard Bentley, 1866), 24.

[2] Jan Borm, "Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology." In *Travel Writing: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies.* Vol. 4. ed. Tim Youngs and Charles Forsdick (London and New York: Routledge), 1–14.

[3] The author is aware of and sensitive to the contemporary debates surrounding gender where there is an increased emphasis on the separation of biological 'sex' from 'gender'. For this paper however, the author has used the words 'women' and 'female' whilst considering the Georgian/Victorian understanding of the same, which often equated 'sex' with 'gender'.

[4] Eden, *Up the Country,* 162.

letters about the same 'others', that they were characterised by "an absence of all vice and evil, but...There is the dreaminess of Sleepy Hollow upon them".[5] This gives her the impression of an "Adam and Eve- like state where human greed has not yet made inroads."[6] Reflective of the repetitive trope of objectification stripping the 'native' of his humanity, it is another callback to the imperialist project.

A reluctant longing for adventure and a fascination with the mysteries of the exotic Orient drew the 'savage'- denigrating memsahib out from her palatial residences to 'foreign' sceneries. We see the phenomenon sprinkled throughout several writings; in Constance Cumming's initial description of the "Doorga Pooja", and Eliza Fay's horrified fascination with sati, the ritual burning of widows.[7] Pramod Nayar has argued that the earliest modes of English travel writing in the 17th century focused upon the peculiar duality between variety and diversity.[8] This craving for adventure can be interpreted as reflective of Britain's ongoing historical developments of colonialism and mercantilist expansion.

Simultaneously, the representations of some common preconceived notions of the British visitors to India give us a glimpse into the self-fashioning of British society at the time. Emily Eden is a distinctive voice in that narrative. Expressing embedded preconceptions about the 'Indian experience,' she said regarding the sea voyage to the country, that she "would not do it for £1000 per day."[9] An explanation for Eden's distaste for the voyage reflects the fears she associated with the country. She wrote to a Mrs. Villiers, expressing concern over the possibility of her brother George going to India.[10] She did so by writing about a certain pair (the Elliots, a reference to the family of Hugh Elliot, a governor of Madras) that in her view had contagiously 'caught' India's 'eccentricities,'

> Have you seen your Elliots? I am anxious to know what India has done for them. It is a dangerous experiment, they get so stuffed with otto of roses, sandal-wood and

[5] Emily Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters* (United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1919), 255. https://archive.org/details/missedensletters00edenuoft.

[6] Eden, *Up the Country,* 162.

[7] C.F. Gordon Cumming, *In The Himalayas And On The Indian Plains* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), 4, https://archive.org/details/inhimalayasando00cummgoog/page/n18/mode/2up.

[8] Pramod K. Nayar, "Marvelous Excesses: English Travel Writing and India, 1608–1727." *Journal of British Studies/ the Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2. (April 1, 2005): 213–38. https://doi.org/10.1086/427123.

[9] Amy Marie Christiansen, *The Discomforts of Empire: Emily Eden's Life in India, 1836-1842,* (M.A. Thesis, *A*uburn University, August 4, 2012), 16.

[10] George Eden, 1st Earl of Auckland, later to be appointed Governor-General of India.

> sentiment, they never come quite right."[11]

Thus, through an investigation into the accounts of these women, we get a glimpse of Victorian and Georgian sensibilities shaping the worldview of colonial masters, as well as tools to reflect upon the Indian experience of colonisation and post-coloniality.

Religion

Jemima Kindersley, another English travel writer, stated that who states that "Hindoos' believe that God is one, and the same God extends his dominions to the Muslims and Christians too."[12] This perhaps is one of the earliest expressions of Indic 'monotheism' as understood by the British - an idea which would later be propagated by the likes of Sir William Jones. It was later popularised after the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. It is worth noting that this letter of Kindersley's (Letter XXVIII) was dated 1767, thus preceding the founding of the society by a full seventeen years.

This reveals a significant awareness in the Indian psyche of the added 'respectability' of being depicted as monotheistic and perhaps showcases the growing influence of the Abrahamic faiths in the subcontinent. The palatable 'monotheistic' argument does on the surface seem to have on-ground implications, since Eliza Fay, another travel writer, spoke of a time when her access to temples and festivals was restricted. This implies that she has never directly seen a "Hindoo" idol displayed before her eyes. Her words reflect a certain curiosity marred with disgust at the 'natives'' ways of worship,

> None but Hindoos are allowed to enter temples, but I am told the idols worshipped here are the ugliest forms that imagination can conceive, and to whom Pope's description of the heathen deities may, in other respects, be strictly applied.[13]

This can be contrasted directly with Gordon Cumming, who provides detailed descriptions of the "Doorga Pooja" she encountered in Calcutta.[14] Cumming's interests might have stemmed from the fact that she was the granddaughter of Sir Alexander Cumming, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, in addition to the West's increasing interest in Indology. Unlike correspondence by Fay, Cumming's travel account provides a highly public story-like nature using

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[11] Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters*, 142.

[12] Jemima Kindersley, *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies. (*London: J. Nourse, 1777), 115, https://archive.org/details/lettersfromislan00kind_0.

[13] Eliza Fay, *Original Letters From India of Eliza Fay,* (India: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1908) 194.

[14] Gordon Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), 142.

dramatic techniques to shape and attract British public perception.[15] Her descriptions provide a source of popular reflection within British society of the 'exotic,' albeit 'demonic' representation of the gods of the homogenised pagan.

Kindersley writes of Hindu temples as "pagodas,"[16] reminding one of a rather disparate comparison with Eden writing almost five decades later when Eden refers to Lord Krishna as a sort of "larking Apollo."[17] Noteworthy is the fact that the same tendency was displayed by Cumming, when she speaks of Kali as a "wanton Venus"- this was an author writing a century after Kindersley's works were published.[18] I suggest that this could be interpreted as a callback to the British looking-glass, reflecting more than an 'objective' picture of the Orient and reflective of their perceptions of Indian religion as stagnant.

It also points to another kind of bias that these writings reflect, a tendency through an entire century of female travel writing to homogenise all 'pagan' religions as one, while also attempting to draw Western parallels both for private as well as public audiences. The twofold purpose seems to be an attempt to increase the palatability of writing for a larger audience, whilst also perpetuating the interests of the imperialist project by drawing clear demarcations between the true "light of day" (a reference to Victorian Christianity, and the "primitive religion of the 'Hindoos').[19]

The dichotomy becomes sharper through a near-clear vocalisation of the same through Eden's description of Hinduism. Eden claims that the only merit she finds in the religion of the "Hindoos" is their constant adulation and regard for trees.[20] Eden's regard for trees, however, stems not from their social, ecological or economic significance, but rather from an aesthetic standpoint. This serves as a reminder of her age, when Britain's industrial revolution had resulted in rapid deforestation due to the growing suburbs and urban population, making tree plantation highly desirable. This reminder serves most notably to poignantly highlight the distinctive interpretations of Indian followers and British audiences of the same traditions, whilst living nominally as a part of the same empire, in the colony and metropole respectively.

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[15] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains*, 2.

[16] Kindersley, *Letters from the island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies,* 131.

[17] Eden, *Up the Country*, 350.

[18] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains,* 2.

[19] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains*, 12.

[20] Eden, *Up the Country*, 263.

Women

This section attempts to bring out the intersections of race and gender as perceived by Victorian and Georgian women. Indira Ghose discusses this when she speaks of these women as "colonised by gender, and colonisers by race," thus reflecting the duality of these women as both perpetrators and victims of various sensibilities.[21] Differences in the attitudes of Victorian subjects towards the 'female question,' varied by their position on the gender spectrum. A case study covered in this paper is that of the practice of sati, since it was the one 'ritual' that caught the imagination of writers across the spectrum.

It is worth noticing that while in official discourse targeting a male audience, sati was seen as an 'evil' that needed to be eradicated. It was often employed not merely as a lament for the torture of these widows, but rather as a justification for British rule. Lata Mani contests that the position of sati in British discourse was in itself a part of the imperialist project, since it focused upon making the "ignorant" native aware of his own religious traditions.[22] For women, however, sati was construed to be an advocacy issue for "saving their sisters in another land."[23]

Kindersley's travel account is perhaps one of the earliest references of a British woman engaging with the issue, as early as 1767.[24] Her accounts displayed how prominently the custom had been embedded in the European psyche as an expression of Indian barbarism. Over a century later, Eden too expressed her distaste for the same practice, stating that "poor dear *ranees"* (queens) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh they had met only months prior, immolated themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands.[25] This preoccupation is reflective of the general concerns of the European population at the time, basing itself on the patriarchal notion of protection of the 'weaker' section as one of the primary markers of 'civilisation.'

This is especially significant as this came against the background of a Britan where women's innocence and relative comfort were safely guarded as a cherished marker of a well-to-do home.[26]

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[21] Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30.

[22] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." *Cultural Critique*, no. 7. (1987): 130.

[23] Clare Midgey, "Female emancipation in an imperial frame: English women and the campaign against sati (widow-burning) in India, 1813–30", *Women's History Review*, no. 9. (2011): 95-121.

[24] Kindersley, *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*, 124.

[25] Eden, *Up the Country*, 310

[26] Aycan Gökçek, "Social Position of Victorian Women: Villette and Emma", *Comparative Literature: East & West,* no. 4. (2002): 143-155.

The time was also marked by a constant negotiation of conservative and liberal shaded of opinion, stemming originally from the want of women as well-educated governesses for British boys. This would eventually lead to established families patronising the Queens and Bedford Colleges to act as bastions of higher education for British women. This turbulent time and shifting expectations are best expressed through the missionary discourse in Bengal, urging British women to rescue their less fortunate sisters and transform them into the 'Elizabeth Frys and Hannah Mores of India.' [27]

This appeal to educate Indians, though met enthusiastically, cannot be called reflective of the general British attitudes towards the education of the 'natives'.' Eden, writing to her sister, simultaneously addressed two issues central to the Victorian view of Indian society: the inherent 'inferiority' of the natives and the question of women in the landscape,

> Then as to the Hindu College. The boys are educated, as you say, by the Government, at least under its active patronage, and they are "British subjects," in as much as Britain has taken India, and in many respects they may be called well-educated young men; but still, I cannot tell you what the wide difference is between a European and a Native.....I do not see that any degree of education, or any length of time, could bring natives to the pitch of allowing any liberty to their wives...[28]

Thus, for all her fascination and intrigue for Indian people and culture, we can see clearly throughout her writings that she believed in the inherent racial superiority of the Europeans as a 'master race' compared to the 'savages' of India. As per Eden, the differences and 'savagery' of the Indians were so fundamental to their character that no amount of education could cure them.[29] At another place, she expressed her disappointment at the fact that most girls she saw at a "native female school" would be well-betrothed and removed from education at turning seven or eight [30].

Cumming, writing at a later time, wrote of how "the effect of Western education and Western thought... seething in the Eastern mind is certain." To demonstrate her point, she illustrated the example of the then relatively new Brahmo Samaj, highlighting how they had attempted to illuminate the light of the one "Supreme God." She also spoke in admiration for the reforms against child marriage, polygamy, and widow seclusion preached by the organisation. It is interesting to note that the credit was indirectly passed wholly to British education and foreign

[27] Clare, "Female Emancipation in an imperial frame", 95-121.

[28] Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters*, 281.

[29] Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters,* 285.

[30] Eden, *Up the Country*, 42.

scholars such as Max Mueller who enabled the "rediscovery of the Orient's treasures."[31] Similarly, the organisation's follies (much unlike the 'virtues') were credited entirely to the Indian cultural context. She thus wrote about the Samaj's leader (Keshab Chandra Sen) being held responsible for marrying his underage daughter to the Raja of Cooch Behar, and also how even these Western-educated men were not comfortable with their wives being viewed in public.[32] Hence, these female writers provide an interesting case study at the intersection of race and gender in the colonial experience; one in which religion played a major role.

Appearances and Fashion

Nothing speaks more bluntly of the European perception of Indian appearances than Fay's observation that 'Black Town'[33] was the name with which a part of Madras (wholly inhabited by 'natives') had been as a consequence of the first impressions of these women writers, starting with the colour of their skins.[34]

Another case in point is Eden's description of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's wives. She wrote that "... these two would have been beautiful anywhere. I suppose they were Cashmerees, they were so fair."[35] This obsession with race extends not only to complimenting fair-skinned women, but also into more treacherous waters through the effective dehumanisation of darker-skinned persons. Eden wished that her sister could "have one... brown baby" since they were "prettier."[36] Cumming commented on the Goddess Kali with immense repulsion and disgust, "As Kali (the black) she is generally represented with a black face, and her tongue hanging out, looking just like those Chinese pugs... "[37]

Victorian sensibilities also struggle to negotiate between observation and critique based on the absence of 'proper' (read: modest) dressing and accessories. It is also worth noting that these attitudes transcended borders and travelled the length and breadth of colonies across the world. This can be observed through Eden's private correspondence to an acquaintance regarding the

[31] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains,* 12.

[32] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains,* 14.

[33] Currently George Town, Chennai

[34] Fay, *The Original Letters from India of Mrs. Eliza Fay*, 152.

[35] Eden, *Up the Country*, 228.

[36] Eden, *Up the Country*, 11.

[37] Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains*, 5.

Irish, "If the Irish were not the most degraded savages on earth, they would blush to find themselves alive at all, instead of asking for means to remain so."[38] She also complained about how the "black people" manning her boat had by some strange inadvertence forgotten to put on cloaks. "*Fakeers*" (ascetics) were described as the most "horrid-looking creatures" on the planet for their refusal to don clothes.[39] A strikingly similar picture of "fakeers" was painted by Fay, who complained of their lack of clothes as inherently disturbing. This evokes notions of propriety that had remained consistent among British high society through multiple decades between the two accounts.

Eden also writes descriptively about the jewellery worn by the queens of Maharaja Ranjit Singh,

> Their heads look too large, from the quantity of pearls with which they load them, and their nose-rings conceal all the lower part of the face, and hang down almost to the waist. First, a crescent of diamonds comes from the nose, and to that is hung strings of pearls, and tassels of pearls, and rings of pearls with emerald drops. I can't imagine how they can bear the weight; and their earrings are just the same.[40]

Further insight into the nature of clothing and jewellery in the subcontinent is provided to us by the detailed sketches Eden created of persons she encountered during her travels. A curious feature of several sketches is the presence of animal subjects alongside humans, complete with their ensemble of jewellery, precious stones, and delicate fabrics. A sketch painted by Eden, drawn during her travels through Punjab has been presented as an apt example of the same,

Image 9: Subjects and jewels sketched by Eden on her visitation to Punjab alongside George Eden (Royal Collection Trust)

[38] Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters,* 45. .

[39] Eden, *Up the Country*, 113

[40] Eden, *Up the Country*, 228.

Another noteworthy account in this regard is Kindersley's, who gives her audience an insider's peek into the fashions in a *zenana* (a part of a house secluded for women) in the 18th century, referring to the popular practice of dyeing eyebrows and hair with a "leaf.". It can be assumed that the leaf in question refers to henna or *mehendi*. One can also discern the usage of *kajal* (kohl), Ayurvedic *anjana* (kohl-like substance for soothing the eyes) and red *alta* (auspicious dye).

Kindersley stated that unlike European dresses that are 'continually altered' owing to the rapid change in the fashion climate of the country addressed, dresses in the subcontinent have an unchanging quality to them.[41] Could it be that this travel narrative both shapes, and is continually shaped by perceptions of India as the 'unchanging Orient'? Could it also then be that this view permeates even into a seemingly 'objective' description of mundane clothing?

Kindersley's descriptions speak of the entire Indian population, regardless of religious identity, wearing robes called *jemmas* adorned with silver and gold threads.[42] Her account describes how easily distinguishable upper and lower castes in the country were, based on their choice of clothing, with the lower castes' clothing usually covering only their lower body and being made of cheap calico.[43] Besides, another form of caste identification was the practice of wearing toe rings for women, with Kindersley claiming that women of lower castes were more given to this particular fashion than others. Though seemingly irrelevant, it is important to remember that these 'light details', would have presumably shaped British understanding of, and sympathies with, the mysterious but morally depraved Orient in need of its 'White saviour'.

Conclusion

By analysing the evolution of, or stagnation in British perceptions of the Indian subcontinent through an exploration of four primary aspects - the women's question, fashion, race and religion, this paper has attempted to put forth the undercurrents that shaped British action and policies in India well beyond a century. This analysis also solidifies as an undercurrent, a picture of the British perception of the unchanging nature of the subcontinent. An attempt has also been made to highlight the collaborations and contradictions these women encountered in their Indian experiences during a tumultuous, but exciting period in the Raj's history.

[41] Kindersley, *Letters from the island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*, 222.

[42] In all probability, a reference to the *jamas* of Persian origin that gained popularity in the subcontinent during Mughal rule.

[43] Kindersley, *Letters from the island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies,* 195.

It can be concluded that the lives of women writers were characterised by a peculiar intersection, a unique conflict between their desire to hold on to their distant homeland, and the unavoidable realities of their Indian experiences, a fact that forms the backbone of the travel writing done by European women in colonial India. This negotiation between holding onto their cold, distinct homelands, and reconciling this with the realities of their immediate surroundings, offset a distinctive 'Indianisation' where the memsahib often fell victim to the very Indian-ness she desisted while associating it with 'savages'.[44] Though she witnesses her "soul recoiling" at the view, her Indian servants' act of adding mango leaves onto the door frames for her Christmas celebration, heralds to the memsahib that this 'Indianisation' has been set off, encroaching first on her holiday celebrations, and then her life.[45]

In my readings, the memsahib comes out as more than a simple victim, she takes on the role of both an advocate and an ambassador of her cultural sensibilities. While her worldview remains captive to the British expectations of womanhood and morality, she rises beyond that identity to become a bearer of the British project of 'civilisation'. She does this through her part as both a moral judge of the Indian land, and as a sponsor of British missions of education and activism. With her increasing 'Indianisation' enveloped by reluctance and solidified by surety, it is this memsahib who, unsurprisingly, represents the convergence of the British-Indian experience. Thus, the reluctant memsahib, clinger of tradition and avoidant of change, emerges as a curious creature, a vehicle of the composite culture she had ushered into but never imagined being a manifestation of.

[44] Eden, *Miss Eden's Letters*, 276.

[45] Eden, *Up the Country*, 53.

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Construction of Heroes: Looking at the Warrior Masculinity of Kadathanadu Through the *Vadakkan Pattukal*[1]

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Abstract

Vadakkan Pattukal were ballads written for the warrior classes of Northern Kerala during the medieval period, to elaborate upon the brave exploits of these people. These are mostly centred around men. A few women (of certain castes and classes) also find place in these ballads. However, the representations of these warriors are extremely gendered. This paper attempts to analyse this gendered difference in constructing the notion of a 'warrior masculinity' among male and female warriors. It argues that the representations of these men and women are meant to fit into certain forms of masculinity that might have been the norm in the period. There is a wilful masculinisation of the female (bodies and conduct) in these ballads.

Keywords: gender, Kerala, masculinity, warriors, folk songs

[1] All translations of excerpts from the *Vadakkan Paattukal*, are mine (the author's). Although Malayalam is my mother tongue, there could be minor inaccuracies in the same, due to possible shifts in connotations in certain words over the last 500 years or so. There have also been issues in accessing proper compilations of these ballads, as the complete collection was not available. I had to make do with a few collected ballads. This could also become a problem with respect to my research on Unniyarcha - as far as the section on Othenan is concerned, I was able to make use of four ballads, but for Unniyarcha, I could only get access to one ballad. The analysis of structures of masculinity has been made using John Tosh's essay, which is based on a British context. Upon looking at the ballads and the structures, one could sense a universality, however, the contextual nuances might have been lost.

Introduction

Folk songs and ballads form a crucial source for historical inquiry. The popular origin of such works is among the many reasons why they remain significant sources for a reconstruction of the past. Needless to say, they are a very important part of the history of Kerala as well. George Borrow sees these as the most human of artistic expressions, as they were composed for the people, and by the people, documenting stories of the people before writing became a conscious art and more accessible.[2]

M C Apunni Nair opines that the creators of the folk song (locally known as *Naadan Paattukal*) culture in Kerala usually hail from the labouring classes of the region, and created these songs for recreation and rejuvenation.[3] They are also considered one of the most important sources of information during a time when publishing and writing was not prevalent among the masses (*Vadakkan Paattukal*). One can also situate the tradition of *Vadakkan Paattukal* among those of 'invented traditions', which may occur in times when the rapid transformation of the society leads to the debilitation of 'older traditions'.

The ballads share many characteristics with the Naadan Paattukal of Kerala, both these works were popular in nature and were considered as an 'inferior' art due to their dissonance with the formal linguistic structures and written literary traditions. But they are both two completely different works of art, *Vadakkan Paattukal* could be considered as a branch of the Naadan Paattukal of Kerala, but exclusively deals with tales of valour involving the warriors of Northern Kerala.

These ballads (composed around the 16th century) could be classified into two types on the basis of their region of composition: *Vadakkan (*northern) and *thekkan (*southern). The *Vadakkan Paattukal* have feuds (familial and societal) taking the centre stage as their theme; they also talk about social customs and institutions of the age. These ballads essentially revolve around two families, the *Puthooram* and the *Thacholi Manikkooth*, who share a martial tradition, but belong to different caste backgrounds – *thiya* and *nair*. Their popularity can be attributed to the lack of ornamental language and ostentation, and the contents of these ballads – mostly tales of valour, honour and sacrifice.

This essay thus tries to understand how the concept of 'warrior masculinity' is perpetuated through the *Vadakkan Paattukal*, mainly by examining two figures that occupy considerable space in the ballads'

[2] Brimley Johnson eds, *Ballads of All Nations*. (New York, United States of America: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 24.

[3] Apunni Nambiar, വടക്കൻ പാട്ടുകൾ. (Calicut, India: Deshabhimani Ptg. & Publg House, Ltd., 1960), 38.

narrative – Thacholi Othenan of the Thacholi family and Unniyarcha of the Puthooram family, though the latter is rarely mentioned.

Contextualising the ballads

Although medieval Kerala's characterisation as 'feudal' has been contested, no one will disagree that it was politically decentralised, and marked by highly unequal distribution of land (and land produce) often along caste hierarchies. The region was split into multiple small principalities, or *nadus* which were controlled by *naduvazhi* (local chieftain).[4] These chieftains received revenue from a variety of sources, including imports and exports, succession fees, fines, gifts, etc.

Though the naduvazhis enjoyed nominal political supremacy in the region, the real power lay with the nobles belonging to the Nair caste, who supplied the chieftains with military support during times of conflict. They were from the traditional martial class of Kerala, who were trained in the art form *kalaripayattu,* and learning this was considered necessary for the ability to defend the self and the family.

According to historian Alappat Sreedhara Menon, the training of young people in these *kalaris* (arenas for the teaching and practice of martial arts) was not based on their caste and gender identities. Thus, even warriors from lower castes like the *Thiyyas* and women like Unniyarcha were provided training. Even though the Thiyyas who are traditionally engaged in toddy tapping received military training, it remains unclear if this paved the way for greater social mobility. Menon also argues that the powers of the naduvazhis were monitored by a local organisation consisting of the members of the Nair caste of the region, which meant that no naduvazhi could rise in rank to become an arbitrary despot.[5]

The saviour of Kadathanadu: Studying Thacholi Othenan

Thacholi Othenan, one of the most important warriors of the Thacholi Manikkooth family is said to have risen to power by gaining supremacy over his Nair overlord. Large portions of the *Vadakkan Paattukal* focus on his heroic exploits. Most ballads glorify how respected he was in Kadathanadu and even the lord of the region held him in high regard. One of the ballads describes in detail how a passerby

[4] Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: DC Books , 2007), 216.

[5] Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 216.

felt when Othenan was lifted by an elephant and carried to Lokanarkavu temple. The passerby (also a prominent voice in this particular ballad), proclaims his desire to run towards Othenan.[6]

A majority of the ballads begin with Othenan being called "*Thacholi Omana Kunj Othenan,"* or "most beloved little one, Thacholi Othenan." In the body of the ballad, he is referred to as "*Kunj Othena*" (literally, "little Othenan" or "Othenan the little one"). It seems as if the singers convey their own personal affections for Othenan through the use of these terms of endearment like "*Omana"* and "*Kunj"* (literally small/little), which may also point to how beloved he was.

He is, without a doubt, also praised for his bravery and a few instances in the ballads exemplify this. The singer describes in detail the preparation undertaken by Thacholi Othenan when he decides to seize the fort of Wangalaar.[7] He visits the Lokanarkavu Temple and promises to offer golden cucumbers to the Goddess if he is victorious. After the proclamation, he borrows a ship from Kunjali Marakkar (another heroic character in the lores of Western Kerala), reaches Wangalaar and seizes it successfully.

The singers also establish that these talents of Othenan were not recently acquired. He is said to have gained these abilities when he was three years old and as a result, could construct shelters, houses and temples out of palm leaves.[8] Othenan's abilities were not just limited to the matters of military, politics and administration. He also excelled at the game of dice and used this ability to win over his rivals.[9] The ballads thus make extensive claims about how he embodied the idea of the 'perfect man' - knowledgeable, courageous and benevolent.

His masculinity is also enforced by presenting him as a 'protector'- not just of people, but of customs and rituals as well. In the ballad *Othenanum Prambilkurukkaatt Cheranum* (Othenan and Parambilkurukkaatt Cheran), Othenan killed someone as he disobeyed *'acharam'* (rituals or customs in Malayalam language ; the possibility of other connotations to this word, especially during the 16th-17th centuries should be considered).

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[6] *Othenanum Prambilkurukkaatt Cheranum* (Othenan and Parambilkurukkaatt Cheran) ; Nambiar, *Vatakkan Paattukal*, 48.

[7] In *Othenan Wangalaar kottaykk poyath* (When Othenan went to the fort of Wangalaar) ; Nambiar, *Vatakkan Paattukal*, 54.

[8] *Othenanum Prambilkurukkaatt Cheranum* (Othenan and Parambilkurukkaatt Cheran) ; Nambiar, *Vatakkan Paattukal*, 63.

[9] *Othenanum Arunathiri Kottele Kunjikkanniyum* (Othenan and Kunjikkanni of Arunathiri fort) ; Nambiar, *Vatakkan Paattukal*, 75.

This characteristic extends to the protection of women as well. He is the protector of the chastity of the local women, and the ballads also note how he killed about three hundred *vellakkaar* (literally, 'the Whites' or Englishmen) because they tried to attack the women of Thalassery.[10]

However, there is a dichotomy in the representation of Othenan. On one hand, he is depicted as the protector of woman. Simultaneously however, his involvement with coercive involvement with women is also mentioned. The image of Othenan as the protector undergoes a change because the ballads state that some women are extremely disturbed by his behaviour, but are unable to take any action since Othenan is an extremely powerful man. Othenan's growing arrogance and exploitation of his authority can be attributed to the support extended to him by the ruler of the region. Othenan takes advantage of the power relations that render the victims quiet.

Masculinising the female: Unniyarcha and the ballads

The *Vadakkan Paattukal* talks about the women warriors of the time as well. Their position within marital relations, religious customs and political administration can be understood through a thorough study of the ballads. Reena P.P. notes that within the ballads, there was no moralistic evaluation of women who bore children with many men, as it was common to the time period.[11]

At the same time, it should also be noted that one of the most important ways in which womanhood is recognised in the ballads is through motherhood. They are often referred to as *"Pettoramma"* (the mother who gave birth). The references to the mother goddesses and the reverence towards them in spiritual life also comes from the cultural significance of offering respect to mothers.[12] This does not confirm that the spaces occupied by women were egalitarian; in fact, they remained suppressed by their male counterparts throughout their lives. Even though these women feature as protagonists, the core themes of these ballads vary greatly. More often than not, these ballads centre around the fulfilment of the wishes of the protagonist. In the society where men were dominant and more powerful, there was relatively less space for women to articulate their desires. Thus, even in the *Vadakkan Paattukal* where there is women have a nuanced representation, this varies from the representations of Thacholi Othenan

[10] Sheena Krishnan Ulamparambath, "Women in Different Characters as Depicted in the Northern Ballads of Medieval Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 75 (2014): 393–99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44158408.

[11] Reena P.P. "Woman in Vadakkanpattukal: A Historical Perspective." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 67 (2006): 301–6, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147950.

[12] Reena P.P. "Woman in Vadakkanpattukal: A Historical Perspective," 304.

and the other male warriors. The next part of this paper will look at the women in *Vadakkan Paattukal*, by looking at Unniyarcha, a qualified warrior born into the *Puthooram* family.

In the ballad *Aattummanammel Unniyarcha Koothu kaanaan poya kadha* (When Unniyarcha of Aattummanammel went to see the *koothu)*, the first portion is dedicated to how Unniyarcha gets ready for it, how she dresses up and adorns herself with jewellery.[13] Her penchant for luxury and opulence is described by stating that the silk cloth she used "travelled across the seven seas and that the bangles she wore had intricate carvings of the *Ramayanas* on it." In spite of being a warrior who carries an *urumi* (a flexible sword with a whip-like blade) wherever she goes, her beauty is described in detail in an attempt to underline her femininity.

In the same ballad, when faced with an adversity, Unniyarcha takes to arms and fights to save her husband and herself from the ambush. Here, her fighting techniques are described in great detail, highlighting her martial skills. In this instance, her anger finds physical manifestations through the form of shivers, which are usually used to describe a male warrior's anger.

However, the masculinisation of Unniyarcha becomes apparent when contrasted with her husband Kunjiraman. Kunjiraman is depicted as everything that Unniyarcha is not - timid, hesitant to fight and cowardly. Usually, these characteristics are associated with women, but are here transferred to Kunjiraman in an exaggerated manner so as to emphasise the masculinity of Unniyarcha. Even in the ballad, Unniyarcha questions the masculinity of Kunjiraman and asks why he is afraid of physical confrontation as a man.[14]

The masculinisation of Unniyarcha can be seen along the lines of patriarchal tendencies of villainising women and their femininity when they assert themselves in male dominated spaces. However, the masculinisation of Unniyarcha and her husband's subsequent feminisation must be viewed within the larger socio-political milieu of Kerala during the time. Most privileged castes of Kerala were matrilineal, which granted relatively more autonomy to the women of the family. However, in the *Vadakkan Paattukal*, that autonomy is justified but not accepted without question. These songs thus reveal a complex society that follows matriliny, but is deeply patriarchal.

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[13] *Koothu* in malayalam could stand multiple things. Firstly, it could be a general term used for a performance. Secondly, it could exclusively refer to a *Chakyar Koothu* performance. There could also be multiple such variations of the word, considering the context and time.

[14] In "ആറ്റുമ്മണമ്മേൽ ഉണ്ണിയാർച്ച കൂത്തു കാണാൻ പോയ കഥ | വടക്കൻ പാട്ട് Attumanamel Unniyarcha Vadakkan Pattu".

Analysing masculinity through John Tosh's framework [15]

Masculinity is often viewed in consonance with a man's ability to hold and maintain property and exercise his physical strength.[16] In the case of Thacholi Othenan, he holds property and exerts his control over the same to maintain it. The previous sections have detailed the glorification of the physical strength of Othenan. Even in terms of authority, Othenan's central position is visible. The discussion around the unchecked power of Othenan and his unfair exploitation of this power is testament to this. Thus, the masculinity of Othenan rests on the "pillars of masculinity" underlined by John Tosh.

These "pillars of masculinity" do not develop in isolation. They are formulated through the process of socialisation, and through agents of socialisation including parents, work, etc. In context of the ballads, the kalari would be a place that propagated such notions. Hence it does not come as a surprise that women like Unniyarcha, who have been trained extensively in these kalaris take on 'masculine' characteristics to prove their worth as warriors.

Tosh also talks about the idea of hegemonic masculinity and its role in the creation of sharp and unchangeable distinctions between men and women, and within various categories of men[17]. These distinctions have been maintained through force and the usage of cultural methods like *Vadakkan Paattukal.* One of the primary facets of this concept is the difference in which women and men are treated. As discussed in the previous sections, women and their ballads essentially deal with the fulfilment of a wish and their courageous exploits serve as an inconvenience on the way, as opposed to the ballads about male protagonists, that are exclusively dedicated to their brave exploits. There is also an emphasis on the physical beauty of the female protagonists, which the male protagonists receive as well, but not with the same intensity.

In the ballad of Unniyarcha there is a section in which she taunts her husband for his cowardice.[18] This confrontation ends violently with Unniyarcha taking up arms. Her husband's cowardice leaves her helpless and ultimately forces her to fight the attackers. Othenan, on the other hand, is not forced to

[15] John Tosh, "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain," *History Workshop Journal* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 179–202, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/38.1.179.

[16] John Tosh, "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity?", 179-202.

[17] The idea of hegemonic masculinity by the sociologist R W Connell ; Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[18] *Aattummanammel Unniyarcha Koothu kaanaan poya kadha* (When Unniyarcha of Aattummanammel went to see the *koothu ;* Nambiar, *Vatakkan Paattukal*, 95.

take up arms, except in pursuance of his own desires and against the injustices that he feels compelled to respond to.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity is further codified by presenting it in opposition to 'subordinate' males, which can be observed in the case of Kunjiraman. The qualities that are considered ideal to a man, like courage, valour and skill, are absent in Kunjiraman. This leads to the creation of a 'subordinate' male identity through which the ballads attempt to codify and strengthen the 'dominant' masculine identity of Othenan, and to amplify the 'masculinisation' of Unniyarcha.

Conclusion

Though the *Vadakkan Paattukal* claim to provide representation to both heroic men and women, my investigation of the nature of this representation yields an interesting interplay of gendered construction and notions of valour. Without doubt, one can deduce the hyper masculinity that surrounds the ballads featuring male warriors like Othenan, and the necessity to masculinise female warriors like Unniyarcha to justify their physically aggressive behaviour. Often, the ballads adumbrated the contours of an 'ideal', by singling out and developing certain characters in a way that stood out remarkably within the given framework.

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Maazi - o - Mustaqbil 2024
Paper Presentation Competition
Histories of Love, Longing and Desire

Concept Note

The power of love upsets the order of things.
—Genesis Rabbah LV8

Francesca Orsini points to the rich tapestry of enquiries of love and desire that have long illuminated South Asian histories - captured by idioms - of *'sringara', 'viraha', 'ishq', 'prem'* and 'love,' each of these situated in unique socio-political contexts. She writes that culture and language play a crucial role in defining these ideas at every stage, from sexual arousal to codified sentiment, from norms of comportment to 'significant stories' that have been memorialised and committed to ritualised recall.

Love has long been thought of as a radical force, a site of possibility and solidarity across liberation struggles - from the anti-caste tradition to anti-imperial movements to Black feminist thought. Love, longing and desire also complicate violent hierarchies based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and origin, and may at the same time become a form of assertion and contestation.

Sanskrit and Prakrit literary traditions of early India explore themes of *shringara* and *kama* across genres - epics, lyrics, plays, anthologies, treatises, oral repertoire of folk epics, tales, and songs. They allow us to trace the evolving social perceptions of love and eroticism against historical developments of monarchies and empires, the consolidation of caste hierarchy, the institutionalisation of patriarchy, concerns over property and lineage production, etc. Love for the other/beyond the self has been one of the foundations of religious traditions that emerged as significant challenges to Brahmanical orderings of society, be it through Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, or local/folk traditions.

Medieval literary traditions are incredibly rich for their explorations of love and desire - be it stories of Hir and Ranjha, Sohni and Mahiwal or the tale of Lorik and Chanda from Chhattisgarh. Perso-Arabic repertoire, apart from being an extensive historical archive, form an equally abundant archive of narratives of *ishq* and *muhabbat* in religious injunctions, Sufi poems, didactic texts on ethics and conduct *(adab)*, poetic romances *(masnavis)*, eulogies (*qasida*) and lyrics (*ghazal*), and the repertoire of devotional bhakti poetry and philosophy. The perception of love as an aberration from ideal behaviour, as '*nafs*' or the base instinct and the source of '*fitna*' or chaos forms an interesting context with which articulations of love and lust can be read.

Forms of gendered expression seek refuge in niches of the folk tradition; the Rajasthani folk songs sung by women and the *jhaggra* (quarrel) genre in Punjab attempt to portray the discord of sexes embedded in their familial lives under the illusion of a chorused conversation. Religio-literary traditions like the Bhakti movement allowed women to subvert patriarchal norms within the framework of devotion. Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai and Lal Ded embody this dissidence by using their bodies and refusal of normative modes of life as mediums of resistance.

In modern history, how would Begum Rokeya Hussain's Sultana dream of love in Ladyland, a feminist utopia away from the gaze of men? Thinking of the child bride and widow at the heart of the social reform movements of 19th century India being debated by Hindu male reformers, missionaries, and British officials - what would her conception of love and freedom be, outside the vocabulary of duty, religion, and patriarchy that she was defined under? Where do we locate the 'chaste' Hindu wife and navigate the possibilities of her dreams in the constraints of domesticity? How does 'bazaar literature' provide creative reimaginations of pleasure and romance and how can it be read against the grain of normative texts? What ground was broken by the 'modern girl' phenomenon of the 1920s in her articulation of flirtatious rebellion (Ramamurthy, 2008)? Why does the institution of marriage become an important strategic tool for Ambedkar and Periyar against caste violence and for rationalism, through Self-Respect Marriages? How would the 'abducted women' of the Partition think of questions of belonging and citizenship to the family and the nation, in response to the Central Recovery Operation enacted by the state to 'recover' them? When it comes to queer existence and discussions of pleasure and sexuality, Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra''s Chaklet, Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf, early 20th century sex manuals and vernacular medical texts form important archives.

In the present day, we need to contend with the idea of love and solidarity as a means of resisting hyper-individualisation on the one hand and the hegemony of a multi-hierarchical social order on the other, as we think about what it means to be 'in community' with others, in pursuance of common ideals. The evolution of the institutional framework and the role ascribed to love in post-colonial Indian society may be seen as a consequence of intersecting influences, including colonial legacies, patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and communal dynamics.

These investigations prompt an examination of the historical underpinnings shaping the socio-cultural landscape of India, shedding light on nuanced relationships between love, societal structures, public and private morality, cultural norms and various intersecting forces. Such an analysis unveils the complexities in the evolution of love's institutional and societal role and helps critically analyse the foundations and modes of sustenance of contemporary social structures.

This Maazi-o-Mustaqbil, we hope to initiate conversations around the ideas of love, friendship, and desire across the fields of history, literature, sociology, philosophy, political thought, culture, and film studies and interrogate literary, textual, and oral archives. We invite you to add to this conversation.

An important note is that though this concept note largely focuses on South Asia, this is due to our (Editorial Board's) personal and academic familiarity and there is absolutely no barrier on potential

themes of research with regards to time or space. We welcome creative interpretations of the theme.

"[W]hen we know what love is, when we love, we are able to search our memories and see the past with new eyes; we are able to transform the present and dream the future. Such is love's power. Love heals." - bell hooks, 1993.

by Baibhabi Hazra, Ishani Ray, Jyotika Tomar, Mariam Junaid, and Tarini Agarwal

Report

On 27 April 2024, the Editorial Board of Ijtihad organised a paper presentation conference on "Histories of Love, Longing, and Desire" as part of "Maazi-O-Mustaqbil", the annual academic meet of the department.

The conference began with the introductory remarks by the Editors-in-Chief of, Tarini Agarwal and Jyotika Tomar. They reoriented the audience and participants with the concept note and the diverse research areas possible when historicising love, longing, and desire. They elaborated on positioning love within ancient, medieval, and modern periods, and the richness of their respective literary traditions. The importance of exploring love within the sociocultural landscape of India was highlighted, specifically within resistance, liberation, and exploring the platonic ideals of love.

The judges for the conference were Dr Smita Sahgal, and Dr Shweta Sachdeva Jha.

Dr Smita Sahgal is a Professor at the Department of History, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, with a teaching career of over thirty years. She has authored a monograph titled "Niyoga: Alternative Mechanism to Lineage Perpetuation in Early India: A Socio-Historical Enquiry," funded by the Indian Council of Historical Research. Her other projects include "Masculinities in Early India: Exploring the Possibility of a Discourse" with ICHR in 2016. She has around forty publications to her credit in national and international journals, and has been a speaker at multiple conferences.

Dr Shweta Sachdeva Jha has been teaching at the Department of English, Miranda House, since 2008, with over 24 years of experience. She is interested in interdisciplinary studies on children's literature, gender history, genre fiction, women's short fiction in Hindi and Urdu, digital history, and archival studies. among her achievements are the Max Planck India Fellowship, the Delhi University Innovations Grant, the Tata Trusts-Partition Archive Research Grant, and more. Currently, she is working on the Miranda House Archiving Project, which aims to trace the history of the college through photography and oral records.

The conference began with the first session, "Tracing Literary Histories of Love, Longing, and Desire," which included four papers.

Opening the session, Aurighno Pramanik, a second-year student from Hansraj College, presented his paper "Poetess, lover, and Beloved: The Human Other in Makhfi Begum's Poetry." The paper focused on Zebunissa Begum's poetry in the medieval period, and utilised self-translations to show themes of female agency and the rich imagery of love and desire within her poetry. The judges raised interesting questions on the change in her writing and agency that developed from it, the democratisation of poetry, and the consumers of Begum's work.

Insha Moquit, a student from the Indraprastha College for Women, presented a paper entitled: "In the Court of Concealed Roses: Unveiling homosexual desires in Rekhti Poetry." This paper focused on the display of women's sexuality and desire in Rekhti poetry. It focused exclusively on early Rekhti poets to showcase examples of female agency in male-authored poetry, and its place in the "lexicon of lesbian desire," where several examples of same-sex love were explicit, and rife with metaphor. She also elaborated on words such as "chapat," "chapti," or "chapatibaz" as signifiers of lesbian relationships. The judges raised the ever-important question of consumerism, and how the social order responded to these forms of poetry.

Jashan Goyal, a third-year student from Hansraj College, presented a paper entitled "World War 1: The Cries of Indian Soldiers", where letters, voice recordings, and songs were analysed in depth to show the condition of Indian soldiers during the First World War. It was a paper that focused on longing, which was a refreshing addition to the conference; not only a longing for loved ones, but for the homeland. It delved into the issue of scribes and censorship within letter-writing under colonial rule, and the display of grief, showing the material and emotional connection between the home and homeland.

For the last paper under literary histories, Sugandhi Prapti, a third-year student of sociology at Lady Shri Ram College for Women presented a paper entitled "Understanding the Love, Longing and Desire of Women of Assamese Folklore: In reference to Lakshminath Bezbaroa's 'Burhi Aair Xadhu'". Burhi Aair Xadhu, or "The Old Granny's Tale" is a collection of Assamese folklore the author discusses to tell the story of Tejimola and her relationship with her stepmother. The author undertook an analysis of Assam's socio-political order at the time, the characters of Tejimola and her stepmother, and an understanding of Tejimola from a feminist lens - where Tejimola's powerlessness in an unjust social order is compared to her Stepmother's cruelty, and the reinforcement of tradition and power. This paper problematises the family within the concept of love, longing, and desire, and empowerment. The author also discusses several interpretations of this folk tale in cinema and literature.

The second session took inspiration from the words of William Shakespeare: "If music be the food of love, play on," including two papers focusing on love, longing, and desire within music.

Dawood Rashid and Divy Tiwari, first-year students from Ramjas College, presented a paper entitled "Tunes of Transcendence in Tales of Transformation: Exploring transgender love songs and resistance in Kashmir," and spoke on the power of music in resistance, specifically within the queer movement. Here, they discussed the songs of love and desire in within the transgender community in Kashmir, and the concept of "vanwun," meaning repetition, which are humorous and romantic love songs. They discussed songs within specific events, such as weddings, or simply getting ready, and how trans folks claim their agency through music and lyricism. The judges asked them about their research methods, the politics of language within these songs, and their overall reception amongst various groups.

In the same vein, Khushi Prasad, a student of Kamla Nehru College, presented a paper titled "Tracing North Indian classical music: Themes of Love, longing and Desire in Khayal and Thumri

during the twentieth century," that explored different forms of Hindustani Classical music, such as dhrupads, khayals, tappas, and thumris, specifically delving into the khayal and thumri forms. The author utilised archival recordings from Prasar Bharati and All India Radio, and located the themes of love and desire within them.

After a brief lunch break, the third and final session commenced, titled "Locating the erotic in material cultures," which featured two papers.

Kashish Nagpal, a second-year student from Lady Shri Ram College for Women, presented her paper titled "The Politics of Desire and Passion: Sensuality and ideological power in Khajuraho's erotic sculptures." Using images of sculptures taken on the author's visit to Khajuraho, the religious composition of the site was discussed, and the presence of erotic sculptures displaying desire and pleasure. A discussion on the attachment of morality or immorality associated with these sculptures was undertaken, as well as the examples of bestiality and hedonism in the sculptures.

The conference's final paper was entitled "Love in a Floating World: Exploring the Erotic in Tokugawa Japan," by Pema Choekyi Thongdok, a second-year student from Ramjas College. The author discussed the concept of "shunga" in Edo Japan, which translates to "spring drawings," which was essentially an erotic medium. Utilising several examples of shunga art forms, the author discussed the "economy of desire," or the genre of shunga where "pictures of beautiful people" were depicted in their association with sexual pleasure, such as in pleasure houses. It also discussed the consumers of this art form, and its spread. The judges lauded the paper for discussing a region outside the Indian subcontinent, adding another perspective to the conference.

The members of the audience included students from various departments of LSR as well as attendees from colleges across Delhi. They actively participated in the day's proceedings and asked questions to each of the presenters.

Following the papers, both judges, as well as Dr Pankaj Jha, the Staff Advisor of Ijtihad provided their closing remarks and feedback, providing useful advice for the aspiring academics, and commending the effort displayed in all eight papers.

This was followed by the Valedictory Ceremony. The results announced were as follows: the third prize was awarded to Auringho Pramanik, the second prize was awarded to Dawood Rashid and Divy Tiwari, and the first prize was awarded to Jashan Goyal. Each winner won vouchers to purchase books at The Book Shop, Lodhi Colony.

At the end of the formal proceedings, several members of the audience, participants and judges spent time going through the display of poems relevant to the theme that had been carefully curated and displayed by members of the Editorial Board and some volunteers. The curation featured poems by Palestinian poets such as Refaat Alareer, Mosab Abu Toha and Mourid Barghouti, Black feminist poets including Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Margaret Walker and

poets from South Asia such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Amrita Pritam, Bulleh Shah, Fahmida Riaz and Ravish Kumar.

The Editors-in-Chief formally ended the Paper Presentation Conference, and the annual academic festival of the History Department, Maazi-O-Mustaqbil, drew to a close.

by Tara Mathur, Editor and Student Rapporteur for the conference

The First World War: The Cries of Indian Soldiers

(presented at the Maazi-o-Mustaqbil Paper Presentation Competition 2024)

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Abstract

The letters written by Indian soldiers during the First World War from the battlefield to their family members contain the worries, laments and longings of a person who misses his home country and remembers his cherished family members from a far-off battleground. It was not a unique or isolated incident but was experienced by one and a half million Indian troops who, under the British Raj, travelled to countries like France, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Turkey, and parts of British East Africa to become part of the Allied effort in World War 1. These accounts are a first-hand narrative that allows us to enter the contested, painful, and violent spatiotemporal realities of these Indian soldiers, who, through the written word, tried to express their 'love, desires, and belongingness' to their families. This paper is a broader attempt to take forward the legacy of 'Humanist ideologies' that revere human experiences and sensitivity while using them to forge a subaltern interpretation of war and analyse its dreadful consequences from the perspective of an Indian soldier. It tries to do so by analysing the personal letters, voice recordings made by Indian prisoners of war in Germany, and folk songs authored by them to make sense of their yearning and sufferings in the warzone away from their home and place them within a specific theme of 'love, longing, and desire.'

Keywords: soldiers, First World War, India, letters, humanism, longing

Introduction

"I have written to you many times, but God alone knows why I don't get your letters. You say you write regularly. Letters mean half meetings, and they are a great consolation to me."

- written in Urdu by an Indian sepoy from Marseilles, France, to Punjab on May 16, 1915

The first world war was an event which changed the spatio-temporal realities for many people, which was accompanied by significant shifts in the political and economic realms across the globe. Even though the war was fought between nation-states/empires, the real fighting in the battlefield was done by humans, who for years left their peaceful homes and loving families with no concrete guarantee of returning alive or able-bodied from this traumatizing blood-sucking conflict. In this background, India too became a part of this struggle, where as a colony for the British, it acted as an inventory for soldiers. Nearly 1.27 million Indian troops traveled to countries like France, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Turkey, and parts of East Africa to become part of the Allied effort in World War 1 as an ally for the British Raj.[1]

Sikhs and Muslims from Punjab and the North-Western Frontier Province made up the majority of these Indian troops, who were mainly from peasant backgrounds.[2] In order to stay in touch with their home country and family, while these troops fought in foreign nations, many letters were sent back and forth between families and the soldiers, conveying feelings of pride, terror, grief, and scorn. The troops would speak to the scribes in Hindi, Urdu, or Gurumukhi about their experiences and sentiments because they were largely illiterate. These first-hand narratives provide insight into the contentious, traumatic, and violent spatio-temporal realities experienced by these Indian troops, who attempted to convey their "love, desires, and belongingness" via writing to their families.

Letters: The refuge and warehouse of emotions

These letters are not 'literature' in the conventional sense of the word. They derive their emotional power from the fact that they are real eyewitness accounts. These letters convey what was lived and felt in ways that literature can only simulate. They have become testimonials of impressions related to the military life of the Indian soldiers and the social milieu in which they were placed. The Indian soldiers

[1] Omissi, David. *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers Letters 1914-18*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999). Pg 4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27283-9.

[2] The Sikhs and Muslims formed a major part of the British armed forces as they were informed by the Darwinian theory of race, where some races are categorised as 'martial races.' Because of their physical prowess and long history of waging wars, the British considered Muslims and Sikhs to be "martial races."

in France and England who were writing 10,000 letters a week, was their only way to express their anxieties about the horrors of war, exposure to the West and the experiences of living in a foreign country away from their home and family.[3]

However, these letters need not be seen as pristine sources for analysing the mental condition of the Indian soldiers as there were several layers of filtration through which these letters were written. The first was that the majority of the letters were written by scribes and not by original authors, which could have altered the essence and sentence formation. The second layer was instituted by the British as a form of censorship, where each and every letter being sent though military post was opened and checked for any sensitive information and also used to check the moral of the soldiers, which was reported in a weekly fashion in moral reports sent to British military commanders for policy formulation. Their heavily mediated nature thus undermines their testimonial value but, as David Omissi notes in the introduction to his anthology Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918 (1991), 'The crucial issue is, surely, less what we cannot learn from these letters, than what we can learn from them.'[4] According to Santanu Das, a careful and deep analysis of these reports can put forth the real nature and aspirations of Indian soldiers, which even though is shrouded by certain filters, can be unfolded by an advantage of the sheer number of letters found in these reports.[5]

These letters forge a material and emotional connection between the home front and the battle front, where the negotiation between distance and proximity is done through the act of letter writing. This created a set of dominant themes, where longing to come home and the desire to eat the native food (*ghee, saag, roti, and daal)* were the most common. This was followed by war as the second-dominant narrative, with talk of loyalty and fighting for the honour of their kaum (community), family, and regiment. Soldiers wrote poignantly about their friends being killed, death, martyrdom, and their deplorable conditions, which gives these letters a transient character of having socio-economic relevance while being an emotional narrative. These also include the love letters, written by newly married couples to each other who were separated by war but connected by post, which mournfully highlight their foregone aspirations of having a settled home and family in India.

All these dimensions associated with the letters of Indian soldiers depicting their foregone desires, longings and aspirations will be analysed using David Omissi's excellent collection of these letters in his

[3] Santanu, Das. "Reframing life/war 'writing': objects, letters, and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918". *Textual Practice* 29, no. 7. (2015): 1265-1287.

[4] Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1276.

[5] Santani, "Reframing life/war," 1274-1278.

"Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918." The British Library's digitization of the original censor reports has also greatly aided to the finding of the conclusions that follow.

The letters were filled by a general feeling of loss and grief over the long distance between the soldier and his native land. They contain self-laments and regrets over not being able to complete the obligation of a son and a husband. In an extract from a letter from Jemadar Indar Singh to a family member in Ludhiana, originally written in Urdu, and dated 15 September 1916 recounts these feelings boldly by writing, "I am very sorry that I have not been able to discharge my obligations towards my family because God has called me already. Give my love to my parents and tell them not to grieve as we must all die someday."[6] Another letter recounting such feelings of longing for his house, where his only refuge from war is in his most prized possession, which is a family photo. The letter is written by Gholam Rasul Khan of the Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade, on the 24th May 1916, to his father in Bihar where he writes, "A photo of the family is his most valuable possession, as it gives him comfort to look at it. I also want to see my home and family for one last time."[7]

An aspect of these letters is the small and meek desires which the soldiers longed along for years. The letters analysed indicate two such demands, one is of *charas* (cannabis) and other is of music instruments like flute. These letters contain a detailed and elaborate procedure to their families to send these items to the battlefield. Ser Gul of 129th Baluchis regiment on 13th September, 1915 to Barber Machu Khan in Urdu wrote very passionately and with great yearning asked for a flute,

> I have no need of anything, but I have a great longing for a flute to play. What can I do? I have no flute. Can you get me one from somewhere? If you can, please do, and send it to me. Take this much trouble for me. For I have a great desire to play upon the flute, since great dejection has fallen upon me.[8]

Another dominant narrative in these letters is of love, which were exchanged between newly married couples. These entail the incomplete aspirations of a couple for a settled and complete family in India. In one of the letters, a newly married Indian soldier advises his family and wife to find a new partner and

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[6] John O' Brien, "Letters from Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, September 1916," British Library, 20th September, 2016, https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2016/09/letters-from-indian-soldiers-on-the-western-front- september-1916.html.

[7] British Archives, "Letters from the First World War." National Archives. 3rd April, 2024, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/letters-first-world-war-1915/india-time-life

[8] David Omissi, "What Indian soldiers in the First World War wrote home about." The Caravan. 30th March, 2024, https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/what-indian-soldiers-first-world-war-wrote-home-about.

consider the earlier marriage as void in accordance with proper Vedic rituals. Dafadar Ram Nath to his father Headmaster Baldav Singh in Rohtak (1917) writes that,

> My idea is that, since it is now four years since I went to my home, my wife should, if she wishes it, be allowed to have connection according to Vedic rites with some other man, in order that children may be born to my house.[9]

In another letter on similar lines a sub-assistant surgeon to his lover in NWFP writes in a very romantic sense that,

> I have received only one letter from you for which I have already thanked you. Why only one? You ought to write to me every week or at least every fortnight. Oh, happy paper, how I envy your lot. We shall be here but you will go and see India.[10]

An interesting aspect which comes out from these letters is that Indian soldiers had several objectives in joining the British army, one of these was increasing the *izzat* (honour) of their respective *kaums* (communities), which would ultimately help the family members back home to have a respectable life. Thus, one Zemadar Sultan Khan (a Punjabi Muslim) in a letter to his family member Malik Fateh Mahomed Khan (in Punjab) in 1917 wrote,

> I want to tell you one thing. Our caste is very low down in the scale, just because we do not serve in the Army. Everyone knows I am an officer, but no one knows who the Buranas are. We get our livelihood here all right, but what about our izzat? The whole object of military service is to raise the reputation of one's caste, and that is what we have to do.[11]

The Indian soldiers also showed allegiance to their cultural attributes and were concerned about their religious purity, which they feared might be contaminated by living in a foreign land. After all, they had crossed the *kalla paani* (Black waters). This is evident from the descriptions of the war in these letters, where it is compared with the dreadful battles of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The German aeroplanes are compared to Vishnu's mighty eagle, the *Garuda*, which featured in the Ramayana. Soldiers refer to demons who feature in Indian religious texts, like the name of Germany is breathed throughout the world such as that of *Harankash*. Several references are made to *Mahabharata's*

[9] Omissi, *Indian Voices*, 9-18.

[10] NL team, "Letters from The Great War" News Laundry, 5th August, 2014, https://www.newslaundry.com/2014/08/05/letters-from-the-great-war.

[11] Omissi, *Indian Voices,* 295-296.

Kauravas and *Pandavas.* A Sikh refers to drinking tea as drinking *Amrit*, a spiritual drink. The letters also refer to the excerpts from the major holy books like the *Quran* and *Guru Granth Sahib,* which showcase the religious zeal and vigour of Indian soldiers to keep their roots entangled with their native culture, majorly in the form of religious continuity.

Numerous correspondences from India discussed current farming circumstances and the success of the current crop season. It should come as no surprise that soldiers were concerned about the material well-being of the family they had left behind, given the news of drought, skyrocketing prices, and dacoit raids. The spring and summer of 1915 saw plague and shortage in the Punjab, which undoubtedly alarmed the soldiers. Punjabi soldiers certainly seemed anxious for more information. These letters are a pointed reminder that the Indian Army was mainly an organization of peasants in uniform, and were deeply concerned about their families representing their deep psychological condition of desiring to be at home and help their families out of agricultural uncertainties.

The letters became the repository of the life of a soldier, where his death also became a part of the content-matter for discussion in the letters. For the soldiers, death was all around, not only on the battlefield, but pushed unavoidably to the centre of their concerns; and many letters are steeped in an awareness of imminent mortality. Some men even seemed to sense that their letters might become their memorial. As a wounded Sikh wrote to his brother: "I must finish my letter ... In a few days I shall go back to the war ... If I live, I will write again."[12] So, it can be argued that the letters written by Indian soldiers from far off lands to their families effectively depict their desires for small things, love for their families and a Longingness to see their native lands and home again.[13]

Voice recordings and songs: More than just voices

However, of all the sources, the most haunting are the voice-recordings made in the German prisoner of war (POW) camps. Around a thousand Indian soldiers were taken prisoner on the Western Front and most of them were kept in the twin camps of Zossen and Wunsdorf, south of Berlin. At both these camps, the POWs were studied, photographed, sketched, and their voices recorded for purposes of academic research. A total of 2677 strong archive of audio recordings in approximately 250 languages and dialects were produced by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission between 29 December

[12] Omissi, *Indian Voices,* 29-30.

[13] According to Santanu Das (2015), these letters were a major departure to a written tradition from the already existing oral culture in the Indian Subcontinent, especially Punjab. The recitation of *qissas* (stories), poetry competitions, the singing of *shabads* (devotional songs) or plays in village fairs and religious festivals are highly reflected in the writings of the Punjabi soldiers. Refer to Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1278.

1915 and 19 December 1918, out of which 300 recording were made from South Asian prisoners, with associated languages being Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi, Nepalese, Khas, Gurkhali, Bengali and English.[14]

According to Santanu Das, these voice recordings are effectively the traces of unmediated subaltern voices, which are a source for archival recovery and peasant consciousness accompanied by wartime captivity. He accords these recordings a 'pure standard' of being a conversation between a listener and a speaker, where the speaker's voice has echoed for more than a century through the corridors of the First World War in a desperate attempt to find a listener. Talking of voice recordings in the context of this paper, these highlight the urgency and immediate attempt of a soldier to put forward his grieve and yearning in a recording device, which reflect his long years of wait for freedom and desire to cherish the love of his native land, family, and local food.

A translation from Punjabi of a voice recording of Mall Singh, an Indian prisoner of war in Half Moon Camp at Wunsdorf reflects the realities of the statements made above and prove the unhindered sense of loss and pain which these Indians faced at the hand of the First World War. It was recorded on 11 December, 1916.

> There was a man who would have butter back in India. He would also have two *sers* (a measure) of milk. He served for the British. He joined the European War. He was captured by the Germans. He wants to go back to India. If he goes back to India then he will get that same food. Three years have already passed. There's no news as to when there will be peace. Only if he goes back to India will he get that food. If he stays here for two more years then he will die. By God's grace, if they declare peace then we'll go back.[15]

These lines effectively reflect the concerns of an Indian soldier stuck in a foreign land, where his primary concern is to have good food from his country, which includes milk and butter (*ghee*). It seems that these lines are his final attempt to make his appeal to the World, where the eventual end is his death. It reflects the lagan of life, wrecked by war, which forced a person into abject longingness to see his country and a deep desire for love and affection. It has entered a dialectical plane, where Mall Singh can be heard throughout these lines, but his story in these lines appeals to all POWs, where at the last line he refers to all his inmates as 'we.'

[14] Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1278-1280.

[15] The Tribune,"Voice recording of Sepoy Mall Singh | Ferozepur | PoW at Half Moon Camp, Germany during WWI." 1st April, 2024, Voice Recording, 1:17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwZgboaU484.

Another recording which invokes similar feelings is of a song recorded on 6th June, 1916. It was sung and written by Gurkha sepoy from Sikkim named Jasbahadur Rai. The song was originally recorded in Nepali and its English translation has been taken from Santanu Das's article - Reframing life/war 'writing': objects, letters, and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918.[16]

> With the rising of the Sisai river, I came, carried in its bubbling flow. Neither can we fly away, nor can we arrive while staying put, the heart cries, sobbing. Listen, oh listen, gold- wearing sister, the heart cries, sobbing. The bubbling of water, the restlessness of this heart, how many days will it take to console yourself? Listen, oh listen, gold wearing little one, how many days will it take to console yourself? If I save two cents, I'll light a Tabalmar cigarette with matches Across Hindustan, what beautiful hills, storage places for fodder. The love we've had, we now have to break apart, bind your heart and be strong. Listen, oh listen, gold- wearing birdie, bind your heart and be strong.[17]

This song here is a haunting example of a life narrative, where the soldier continuously reminds listeners that he is trying to be heard throughout the song with the help of alliterations (listen, oh listen). He invokes many of his familial relations in remembrance and calls them by varying names like elder sister (*Didi*) and little girl (*Kanchi*). He also points to the wholesome geography of his place by placing mountains, hills, water, and trees in his memory, which simultaneously rubs against the world war setting of cigarettes and match sticks, which reflect the intersectionality and overlaps of his present and past memories.

According to Santanu Das, Jasbahadur is the First World War poet par excellence for he records history not as grand narrative or cultural memory but as 'a structure of feeling,' where his song is a testimony of not only his but his fellow soldiers 'historical trauma' which is marred by varying layers of desires, yearnings and longings as already discussed from the letters quoted above.[18]

Conclusion

The view of the World War that one gets from a humanist perusal of the Indian soldiers' letters and voice recordings allows us to see a very different picture of the conflict. A historical narrative that measures its horrific consequences in numerical terms of the people dead and maimed. or the monetary

[16] Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1281.

[17] Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1282-1283.

[18] Santanu, "Reframing life/war," 1281-1282.

value of the losses incurred by various nations is inadequate and woefully instrumentalised. A more humane assessment of the war needs also to take into account the emotional trauma, mental stress and deep anxieties that the soldiers faced in the battlefield between 1914 and 1918. Telling their lost but vibrant stories is one way of providing them much delayed, if partial, justice and rightfully giving 'voice' to the people who went 'voiceless' in history. This paper is a limited attempt that seeks to illustrate how a micro analysis of individual articulations of pain and anxiety by soldiers can help us look afresh into not just the price of war but also the aspirations of the soldiers vis-à-vis the social hierarchies within which their families were trapped back home.

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About the Cover and Illustrations

Front Cover
The cover page features two silhouettes of young women drawing something on a blank board with pens or paint brushes in their hands. It comes from a photograph taken by Jyotika Tomar of one of the old LSR College Magazines, in the Library Archives. An idea that emerged quite strongly from it was that of 'women creating' and thus was chosen as a suitable cover for a journal run entirely by women undergraduate students and with all (but one!) of the contributing authors being women, the latter entirely by coincidence.

The cover has a light brown coloured background with a slightly crinkled paper texture and "Ijtihad" written on the top as the main title. Below it, in a smaller font are the words "Volume X." At the bottom it says "Department of History, Lady Shri Ram College for Women."

It has been designed by Aarushi Koul. Aarushi is a final year student pursuing English Literature at LSR and loves designing, films and frogs.

Back Cover
The back cover is empty. It is light brown, like the front cover and has a crinkled paper texture.

Images 1 - 8
Screenshots from the films, provided by Annie Antony and Muskaan Gupta

Image 9
Subjects and jewels sketched by Eden on her visitation to Punjab alongside George Eden (Royal Collection Trust) ;
Dickinson, L. *The Honourable Emily Eden (1797-1869) - Portraits of the Princes and People of India/ by Miss Eden.* 1844. Drawn on Stone. Royal Collection Trust. https://www.rct.uk/collection/1070252/portraits-of-the-princes-and-people-of-india-by-miss-eden-drawn-on-stone-by-l.

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