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Himalayan Studies: Literature, Society and Globalization



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Himalayan Studies: Literature, Society and Globalization

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Himalayan Studies: Literature, Society, and Globalization is a vast trajectory in and beyond academia. Himalayan studies constitute not just a geopolitical area or any spatial analysis only. It is an in-depth study of the cultural and ritualistic patterns, daily activities, and the inheritance and retention of the indigeneity of the villages and communities in the Himalayas. There has been a major change in terms of development before the independence of India, and the post-independence phase in the lives, education, livelihood, democracy, pluralistic principles, economy, education, and in the role, status, and hierarchy of the people. Economic studies, social and literary studies, gender and sexuality studies, caste structure, policymaking, ethnicity, social experience, and myriad other factors are responsible for inculcating an open-endedness in the study of the Himalayan region. Along with that, there is also the growing fear of deforestation, consumerism, and construction due to tourism on a large scale that has affected the overall socio-political and cultural fabric of the Himalayas. Volume V, Issue I of Litinfinitive Journal tries to find out this symbiotic and often contesting relationship among the several factors that determine the present and future of Himalayan Studies. It will be appropriate to contemplate upon what Arjun Guneratne has opined in his edited volume *Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya*:

“Given that cultures are not unitary, homogeneous phenomena, universally shared by all members of a society, it might reasonably be asked whether we can speak of cognized environments in any meaningful sense. The alternative, however, is a radical particularism at the level of the individual, which is equally untenable.” (Guneratne 3)

He further adds that:

“I draw on two concepts to reconcile the notion of a cognized environment with the fact that culture is not a unitary or homogeneous set of meanings: that of communication and of cultural scales.” (Guneratne 3)

It is a study of this cognized environment in the Himalayas that forms a pivotal point in the current issue of the journal. The first paper, *Yoga 'Walmart' in the Himalayas: A Case of Wellness Centres in Dharamshala*, by Isha Jha and Uttam Singh analyzes a large number of wellness and rejuvenation centres in Dharamshala, a city in Himachal Pradesh. They have discussed the concept of the backup economy, the state productivity and economic support and how these wellness centres form an integral part of Himalayan tourism. The retreats are not the only way through which the owners

accumulate money, but they also have other decent sources of income that give them a steady sense of livelihood. The paper also focuses on the tenets of a neoliberal economic system and how the newfound stakeholders of neoliberalism are gradually catching up to the expectations of a culturally-superior market of entrepreneurs. The second paper of the issue, *Gendered Identity in Community and Crafts of Himalayan Weavers* has two authors. Dhriti Dhaundiyal and Surekha Dangwal discuss the quintessentially dynamic role that women play in the villages of Uttarakhand. Since there is a paucity of many commercial outposts, it is about the flourishing of the community handicrafts that enable the villages to sustain on a large scale. Women weavers in the Uttarakhand region earn a lumpsum amount of their livelihood by doing knitting and weaving works, thereby challenging, and subverting the inherently dominant ideas of the patriarchy and contributing not just on a domestic but also a commercial scale to the household and the economy. In this process of community weaving, the women of Uttarakhand are not just getting the right community support for indigenous work, but they are also contributing to the overall economic input of the state, by connecting to shops, retail marts, and customers.

The third paper of the current issue is by Puspa Damai, and his paper is titled *Cannibal Himalayas? Jamaica Kincaid's Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*. This work by Kincaid, although essentially compartmentalized as travel writing, has multiple layers to it. It is about the explorations that the author makes in the course of her travel to Nepal, highlighting the discourse of both a postcolonial displacement and a study of the space narrative in the depiction of the garden. Damai, in his paper, discusses cannibalism in all its plausible senses that are available, by concentrating on the act of consuming or eating canonical works produced in literature, and simultaneously, resisting, breaking, and dismantling the legacy left by the forefathers of colonialism. The paper is an analytical depiction of what cannibalism is, what are the forces of cannibalism that we find in Kincaid's work, and how the trope of cannibalism is used in the book.

The fourth paper of this issue is titled *Himalayan Narratives: Cultural Reflections and Environmental Perceptions in Indian English Literature* authored by Dr. Priyanka Singla. She writes about the inherently strong yet changing perception of the Himalayan environment in selected Indian English writing. She introduces the Himalayas as a region of irrevocable myths and undeniable forms of esoteric practice and then goes on expanding on the literary outputs of the region, including the indigenous communities and their narratives, oral, written, stories, poems, novels as literary works that hold up a mirror to the conceptualization of Himalayan writings in English.

The current issue also contains two book reviews. Arpana Gurung reviews *Everything the Light Touches* by Janice Pariat. The author focuses deep inside the various fragments of ecocritical perspectives and the characters of the novel that depict parallel journeys throughout and never meeting at intersecting points. It is about retaining the curiosity of the readers that the Pariat does, instead of directing or dictating anything to the readers. Gurung has pointed out eloquently how 'this essence- of a journey, of how human beings are not stationary beings, of how they are constantly moving, evolving, becoming- has been captured by Pariat in a tone that made me ponder on the

possibilities that lie beyond our comfort zone. A lesson from the nongrads, nomads that used to run freely across the mountains and the valleys- foraging, collecting, conserving, and never taking more than is necessary- this way of living – even if not possible today- but an inspiration to start living sustainably, by leaving nature as is and only using as much as is needed’ (Gurung 53). Finally, in this issue, I write a review of George Thadathil’s *Democracy in Darjeeling*, not just a text, but a collector’s item that dwells upon the haloed as well as the less-explored terrains of Darjeeling. Darjeeling has a chequered history of its own, with the colonial legacy holding large to dominate, educate and intensify the process of diverse cultural patterns, and the postcolonial infiltration and rapid globalization affecting the economy, socio-political, religious, and cultural factors in the years after independence. Darjeeling is not just a space that is studied in the book, but it is seen as a palpable entity, growing, and changing over time. It can very well be said to be a time-tested document that is also directed to the youths and the newer generation of learners who want to experiment with their thought processes in the understanding and rehabilitation of Darjeeling as the queen of hills.

So, here we present Litinfinitive Volume V, Issue I for our readers.

I express heartfelt thanks to all our esteemed editors, reviewers, and contributors.

I offer my sincerest thanks to Penprints Publication, for their constant technical support.

Thanking You,

Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Editor-in-Chief
Litinfinitive Journal
Kolkata

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Guneratne, Arjun. *Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya*. 2009, doi:10.4324/9780203864364.

Bio of the Editor - Sreetanwi Chakraborty is an Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata. She graduated from Presidency College Kolkata, did her Postgraduation from the University of Calcutta, and obtained her M. Phil from Rabindra Bharati University on *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up: A Feminist Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. This was published as a book in 2019, and it received the "Rising Star" Award for non-fiction category at New Town Book Fair, Kolkata. She has been the recipient of the "Charuchandra Ghosh Memorial Award" for securing the highest marks from Calcutta University. At present she is pursuing her Ph. D from Ranchi University. She is the Chief Editor of a bilingual biannual academic journal *Litinfinitive*. Apart from academic publications in reputed national and international journals, her translations and literary articles have been published in Bengali and notable English journals and magazines in India, Bangladesh, and South Africa. Her areas of interest include Indian English poetry, Indian English drama, Feminism and cultural politics, and South Asian Diasporic Studies. She has passed 5th year in Rabindra Sangeet, with distinction and 4th year in classical music from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad. She is a trained painter in oil, acrylic, water colour and charcoal. Her novel "*Rhododendrons*" published by Penprints Publication received a huge response in the International Kolkata Book Fair, 2023.

Yoga 'Walmart' in the Himalayas: A Case of Wellness Centres in Dharamshala

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Abstract

This article explores the proliferating small-scale wellness centres such as Yoga, meditation, reiki, spas, and healing and rejuvenation therapies in a small town, Dharamshala. The expansion of such spaces has its interlinkages with the liberalization of the Indian market, expansion in consumer choices, shift in the nature of employment and retrenchment of everyday security in the post-reform period. These centres have become a source of employment for the unemployed youth in this small town, especially the pastoral tribe of Gaddis. Through an ethnographic study, the article establishes that deteriorating state support and retrenchment of security have not only induced these service providers to manoeuvre, improvise, employ jugaad to run their Yoga business but also engage themselves in multiple avenues, thereby keeping a 'back-up', in case the other avenues/ventures fail to earn a living. The article coins the term 'back-up economy' to provide a name to the processes, practices and strategies adopted by the service providers who in the scenario of shrinking state support and government services, as well as evolving forms of Yoga realize that 'doing Yoga is not enough' to survive in the market. The back-up economy would resonate with situation of youth struggling with the evolving state-market practices and shrinking state support and collectively defines such practices, processes that though informally, contributes to the employment situation in post-reform India.

Keywords: Dharamshala, Back-up economy, Jugaad, wellness, Yoga.

With a population of around 55000 Dharamshala is not a big city but has become a popular tourist station with a vibrant cultural economy. It is highly popular among those seeking wellness tourism owing to its large number of Yoga, meditation, rejuvenation and wellness centres; though it is undeniable that the town came to limelight with the presence of the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama who settled here in 1960. Dharamshala is considered “one of the most cross-cultural towns” (Shekhawat 1995) owing to the varieties of nationalities and ethnic groups. The rise of cultural cosmopolitanism in Dharamshala is indistinguishable from the evolving counterculture movement in the west in 1970’s also known as the “Hippies” (Bloch 40). In 1989, Dalai Lama was conferred the Nobel Peace prize, projecting Dharamshala as the focal point of Buddhist meditation studies, practices as well as tourism. These sequence of events along with the State's imagination to make Dharamshala a cultural hub and tourist destination helped scale the economy and attract investments (TCP 2018). Dharamshala has been projected as the global cultural cluster in the western Himalayas.

In between 1970’s-1990’s, the presence of three transnational¹ Yoga and meditation centres provided a perfect space for Yoga and meditation practices centres in this quaint hill town. The transnational Yoga centres were visited by their own disciples/initiates and served as an exclusive space. After the liberalization of the Indian market and with the improved mode of transportation and communication networks around 2010, several small-scale wellness centres have emerged not only in Dharamshala but also in other hill stations (see, ME van der Zee 2017). This article focuses on the small-scale wellness centres that have mushroomed in recent years. The locals attributed the increasing inflow of tourists to the newly constructed Cricket stadium in lower Dharamshala. The picturesque stadium flaunting the Dhauladhar in the backdrop was broadcasted to the entire world during cricket matches. Soon after, the built environment of Dharamshala witnessed rapid construction of hotels, homestays, cafes, restaurants, lodges, dhabas. In the meantime, State projections to project Dharamshala as a world-class tourist destination and Smart city, market forces, location and presence of Tibetan cultural institute together provided a conducive atmosphere for the growth of many small wellness centres. A new range of small-scale Yoga and wellness centres can be spotted not only in Dharamshala but several such centres run parallel to the Dhauladhar mountain range (e.g. Palampur, Kullu, Manali, Banjar, Kaza, Shimla) and the techniques of wellness such as spa and rejuvenation, reiki and massage centres, cultural artefacts stores facilitated by market forces. Such contexts and developments allow employing ethnographic methods to study the wellness centres that have become a point of inspection to document the various processes

¹ Between 1970-mid 1990’s, a few wellness centres were established: Tushita meditation; Goenka’s Vipassana; Iyengar Yoga (established in 1972; 1985 and 1994 respectively).

rapidly evolving in wellness market. The data has been collected in the years 2018-2019 and 2022 using focused interviews (of owners/service providers, customers), observations, walking in the city and secondary sources of websites, feedbacks, flyer walls, pamphlets and so on.

This article explores the small-scale wellness centres to capture the expansiveness of the growing cultural market. It draws attention to the landscape of wellness centres, and the methods and strategies adopted by the service providers in the post-reform period. The mushrooming wellness centres with an increasing inflow of both foreign and domestic tourists around the commodification of Yoga (Jain 2014; Bowers and Cheer 2017) and meditation in Dharamshala requires scholarly exploration to provide a larger picture of how culture and spaces are made marketable. The booming wellness centres become new intangible materiality in the Himalayas and need an exploration to draw a trajectory of: why are these wellness centre on the rise? Why has a small town like Dharamshala witnessed such a shift? What is the topography of these wellness centres and who are the people running these centres? Such questions require ethnographic exploration and critical intervention to understand the various processes that not only change the built environment of Himalayan towns but reckon it as the upcoming 'Walmart of Yoga'². The ethnographic exploration of small-scale wellness centres in Dharamshala focuses on the activities and practices of service providers that resonate with the ideas of 'back-up economy'. In post-liberalization era, the shrinking State support and people relying on *jugaad* (Mankekar 2013; Jauregui 2014; Kaur 2016) in the absence of resources and to ensure a sense of *security* has been dealt with in academia. However, the ongoing processes in Dharamshala extends on the credo of *jugaad* realizing that 'doing Yoga is not enough'. The service providers engage in various ventures, other than Yoga to ensure security of livelihood and dignified income. The article coins the term 'back-up economy' to collectively understand the prevalent yet unrecognized practices and strategies employed by a large population of educated unemployed youth that is not just restricted to Dharamshala. The ethnographic exploration of the young enterprising service providers in Dharamshala interlinks the growing insecurity to the discourse of neoliberal, self-responsible and enterprising individuals.

In doing so, the article first discusses the topography of the wellness centres that have proliferated in recent years to understand the interconnectedness of the wellness centres with improvised, local solutions and neoliberal economic systems. The article fills the gap in the existing scholarship which has understood wellness centres in a restricted manner. Wellness centres are imagined as plush, well-sanitized spaces, however, the article asserts that the way these centres are functioning and proliferating in western Himalayas does not resonate with the preconceived notions of such spaces. Second, the article establishes that the growing wellness centres are purely a means to earn a

² Personal communication with Ram Bhardwaj, June 13, 2022 at McLeodGanj

living for the service providers and must be examined in relation to the retrenchment of security in post-reform India.

Mapping the unmapped: Landscape of wellness shops in Dharamshala

Dharamshala, a colonial hill station, the second home of the Dalai Lama and inhabited by the pastoral tribal community, has been exposed to varied cultures for centuries. The Tibetans, Gurkhas, foreign nationals from various ethnicities, people from various states in India such as Kashmir, Punjab, Bihar, Rajasthan and so on present it as a fluid and “cosmopolitan community” (Bloch 37). The migrants from various parts of India and abroad came to Dharamshala in search of employment opportunities or entrepreneurial engagements. They opened small pit shops to cater to the tourists by leasing land from the Gaddis. ‘The Gaddis did not engage in the evolving tourism market in the 1990’s as much, given their absence of skills to do business. They utilized their land as capital to rent it to the traders and businessmen’³. Kapila (2011) in her work “The terms of trade” explains that traditionally the Gaddis trade in wool, meat and milk with the outside world had been prevalent for generations (“The terms of trade” 199), though this trade did not culminate into a market as the older generation of Gaddi traders went to Kumaon region in eastern Himalayas and the younger generations found a market in Amritsar, Panipat and Bikaner (“The terms of trade” 201). With liberalization of market, unable to face competition in the wool market, Kapila (2008) states that the economic conditions of Gaddis declined as the Government removed subsidies on the purchase price of wool (“The measure of a tribe” 128). Alongside, the younger generation looked at pastoralism as being “backward” (“The measure of a tribe” 128) and refused living *ghomtu* (pastoral) lives. Development of a market or a *bazaar* in Dharamshala is a recent phenomenon. In recent years, Dharamshala and its surrounding has emerged as a lively cultural market. Liberalization of market and shift in the nature of work required skills which were absent in the local population (Gaddis). However, the prospect of a growing market particularly helped Gaddis in upward mobility by utilizing land as capital (Singh et al. 2022). Over the last decade, the Gaddis have either opened (Yoga and meditation, trekking and adventure, hotels, lodges, cafes, dhabas, grocery, and medical shops) or have rented/ leased spaces for business to outsiders. A large number of Youth from other states in India have also settled in Dharamshala and started their wellness centres that provide services in Yoga and meditation, spas and rejuvenation, Reiki and healing, sound therapies, Yoga retreats, Yoga vacations, Yoga teacher training courses and so on.

The demand for wellness agencies and services that have catapulted under the neoliberal system, wherein, those working in the neoliberal economic enclaves take recourse in market practices that commodify and medicalize bodies have been largely dealt within the discourse of neoliberalism (Lau 2000; Ziguras 2004; Carrette

³ Personal communication with Sagar, July 3, 2022 at McLeodGanj (Dharamshala)

and King 2005; Nayar 2009; Lavrence and Lozanski 2014). However, scholarship neglects the bottom-up approach and conditions of the youth that provide services to the consuming class to understand the precarity that they have been exposed to with the restructuring of the market. In doing so, it explores the upheavals of neoliberalism and how service providers are managing it. How do service providers bank on the vulnerabilities of the clients and create an avenue for employment opportunities for themselves? In mapping the landscape of the wellness shops in Dharamshala, the precarious situation of the young service providers is entangled with the “unknown unknowns” (Standing 6-7). The wellness shop and the service providers harness and optimize the opportunities to expand in the cultural market and turn entrepreneurs. These enterprising selves in new economy resonate with discourse of neoliberal, self-responsible, enterprising individuals (Gooptu 2013; Binkley 2014; Deuchar and Dyson 2020). The emerging entrepreneurs lack in skills, marketing strategies and funding from State and global circuits, which pose a question on how discourse of neoliberal work in small towns.

In Dharamshala Yoga and meditation centres cater to a broad income range of customers: from budget Yoga centres to premium Yoga centres. The image that comes to mind when one thinks of Yoga studios is that of spacious, neat and sanitized space with an ambience that is infused with well taken care of aesthetics (Photo 1). However, barring a few; Yoga and meditation centres in Bhagsunag and Dharamkot come across as basic wherein infrastructural investments have been kept minimal (Photo 2).



Photo 1 and 2: A high end budget Yoga studio in Dharamshala. Source: Authors.

Several centres are located in isolated localities and one can only reach them on foot (Photo 3 and 4). The ambience in these centres is particularly not grand/ taken care of like the Yoga studios in big cities. Majority of them function by investing less in infrastructure. They work on the idea of ‘*minimum investment, maximum returns*’. Most of these centres have one big room/hall or terrace which is minimally equipped with Yoga mats, Yoga props and accessories, wall art and covered with dupattas, Mandala tapestry or wall hanging. The service providers do not have enough capital to invest in creating an ambience that is ‘well suited’/‘desired’ to meditate

and do Yoga. Most of these centres/ terrace spaces have been taken on rent from local Gaddis and therefore any structural changes in infrastructure is neither feasible nor allowed. Service providers explained that the nature of their *business* is erratic, and they are small players who do not know the scope of their business in the next tourist season, they do not invest in infrastructure⁴. Dilapidated buildings dim lit small rooms used as Yoga halls, improper ventilation, unhygienic makeshift arrangements, temporary roofing on terraces using plastic sheets, tarpaulin cloth can be easily spotted in the upper Bhagsunag and Dharamkot areas.



Photo 3: A Yoga centre (Vishu Yoga) functioning on a terrace in Dharamkot. Photo 4: A Yoga centre in upper Bhagsunag. Source: Authors.

The strategies adopted by people need to be seen through the discourse of '*jugaad*' which is an inherent part of the neoliberal systems. '*Jugaad*' a vernacular term used to explain the innovation, quick-fix solution, that allows everyday life to somehow function in the absence of concrete solutions (Kaur 2). The way wellness centres are proliferating in absence of State support "*jugaad* as a vehicle of mobility, here, becomes instructive in the ways in which the neoliberal state turns the discourse of lacks, absences and adversity on its head" (Kaur 11). *Jugaad* in the context of India becomes a choice particularly informal, disorganized and extralegal business (Rai 7). With the retrenchment of the market and shift in strategies of people, wellness centres are not only limited to mental and physical well-being, but as stated it becomes a source of income and employment. With the advancement in communication and transport networks, one can locate a new range of wellness centres emerging in isolated locations and contributing to a new kind of materiality—makeshift, temporary spaces to accommodate the consumers, which establishes *Jugaad* as a strategy "by skirting convention, defying received ideas, and getting the job done" (Mankekar 38). As Mahi succinctly puts it:

⁴ Personal communication with Shiva, July 2, 2022 at upper Bhagsunag

Most of the centres here do not follow a standard in terms of provisioning of services, basic philosophy behind Yoga, provision of trained teachers and spaces for Yoga sessions. Many centres do not even have a proper hall with required props to teach Yoga. Just spreading your legs apart is not Yoga⁵.

This is not the case of one wellness centre, but many in Dharamshala and in several small hill towns in the western Himalayas such as Manali, Kaza, Shimla, Kullu, Palampur and Banjar. The structures and ambience of such wellness centres are purely dependent on strategies of *jugaad* for networking and proper functioning. Such a system is influenced by the values system (neoliberal) that ultimately contributes to the haphazard growth of culture shops in western Himalayas. Alongside, the mechanism and agencies of neoliberalism provide opportunities to the youth of marginal sections of society. The case of Vishu (name changed) Yoga (Photo 3), a local Gaddi (received formal education till fifth standard) youth in the business of Yoga teaching is interesting. Vishu was self-tutored and had learnt everything on his own; and speaks English. He initially would run errands for the locals, later started working as a waiter at Hotel Mclo in McLeodGanj. Soon after, he befriended a foreigner and was introduced to Yoga. Being a Gaddi, he was exposed to physical hardships such as trekking on arduous paths on an everyday basis, carrying heavy loads and therefore learning Yoga or building a career in it was not difficult because the entry barrier in Yoga is physical fitness. He teaches at a well-known Yoga centre in Dharamkot as a Yoga instructor in the morning and soon after conducts his own classes at a rented terrace space in Dharamkot. His investments in the terrace venue are minimal and any income generated counts as profit. He also offers individual home Yoga classes. He has constructed a house of his own in McLeodGanj and would soon be moving to Tokyo with his wife who is a citizen of Japan. The Yoga teaching business has been a blessing for several Vishu's here, who would otherwise have remained unemployed. Vishu's case resonates with Plant's (1992) explanation '... individuals have to have enterprising attitudes if markets are to work, and there has to be a cultural climate that favors enterprise for them to work effectively' (85-86) and the adaptability towards the market practices and processes make them new entrepreneurs (Jha and Singh 2022). Studies like ours run the risk of being read as counterintuitive to the neoliberal image of fragility and risk created by neoliberal systems (O'Malley 2004; Sulkunen 2009). Though we do not negate the stand of scholarship, cases like those of Vishu definitely ask us to revise the way we have been thinking about neoliberalism (Upadhyay and Jha 2023). It brings to fore the mechanisms that are in place in the cultural market wherein the youth in the absence of support from the state has imbibed the conduct of enterprising individuals and take the onus upon themselves for their survival. The wellness centres are an unmapped segment of the wider cultural economy interconnected with the restructuring of the global market. Discussions and pictures in this section shed light on how local solutions are employed utilizing the credo of *jugaad* to survive in the market and achieve never-

⁵ Personal communication with Mahi, July 30, 2022 at upper Bhagsunag.

ending aspirations. Such strategies and solutions together create a milieu which is peculiar to neoliberal framings.

Back-up economy: 'Doing Yoga is not enough'

The ongoing market practices, methods and strategies adopted by the service providers by employing *jugaad* is illuminating. The article alludes that the methods and practices of the service providers are an extended form of *jugaad* wherein they not only manoeuvre and improvise but also engage themselves in multiple avenues, thereby keeping a back-up, in case the other avenues/ ventures fail to earn a living. We employ the idea of 'back-up economy' to assemble the practices and methods employed by the young service providers to deal with retrenchment of security and unemployment. The article theorizes the term 'back-up economy' to provide a name to the processes, practices and strategies adopted by the service providers who in the scenario of shrinking state support and government services, as well as evolving forms of Yoga realize that 'doing Yoga is not enough' to survive in the market.

The philosophy of Yoga is to connect mind, body and spirit. However, in recent times, the commodification of Yoga denigrated its foundations with the erosion of traditional methods of immersion and the *guru shishya parampara*. Yoga as a tradition has been tweaked to suit the new market demands of the clients working under the neoliberal systems who are hard-pressed for time. One of the respondents lucidly explained "off late the tourists demand a piece of everything in a small trip that they undertake. The focus is not on mastering an art but having an experience of everything. They are the bucket-list travelers. With these evolving demands of tourists, the Yoga and meditation market has adapted itself to tailor-made Yoga and meditation programs, retreats and teacher training courses. For instance, most of the Yoga classes start after 8 am in the morning, which is rather late to perform asanas but since, the tourists do not prefer waking up say at 4 am, we have to adjust to their demands"⁶. Customers emphasize on attaining a beautiful body, healthy mind and dealing with a stressful life through Yoga as exercise rather than posture-based asanas. Brosius (2010) succinctly explain the recent surge in wellness as:

Wellness-gurus have combined the idea of the body as a temple with that as a signifier of affluent, beautiful lifestyle and happiness. The need to appear well-groomed and physically attractive has assumed greater importance in the last decade, not just for women, but for men as well . . . A beautiful body is a happy body (Brosius 308).

⁶ Personal communication with k. Neharia July 29, 2022 at upper Bhagsunag.

A large proportion of the clients/customers look at Yoga and meditation as a way to recharge and rejuvenate their senses, and thus their association with Yoga is short-lived and service-oriented in the cultural economies. The service providers/entrepreneurs who are on the lookout to find new, innovative ways to earn money count on the vulnerabilities of their clients and customize their programs according to the market demands. With such development in Dharamshala and many other places, Yoga has increasingly been associated with tourism (Dillette et al. 2019) and emerged as a driving force in the cultural economy.

Several wellness centres in Dharamshala where Yoga classes are run, do not have an idea of the basic philosophy behind the ancient art of Yoga. One of the respondents, Yavna shares his journey from being an educated unemployed youth out of college to be the owner of a holistic Yoga centre in upper Bhagsu Nag. He explains "I left for Arambol when I was 21 years old. I had no knowledge of Yoga nor an inclination towards Yoga, all I knew was that a lot of youngsters from my village went to different states in India to earn a living, and some of them went to Goa to learn Yoga or work as waiters. I started a small restaurant (on lease) in Arambol and gradually learnt Yoga and meditation practices from *here and there*. After spending seven years in Arambol and having collected enough money to start my own holistic Yoga centre, I came back to Dharamshala"⁷. The case of Yavna resonates with several other massage centre owners, tour and travel guides, spa and rejuvenation service providers who also shared similar stories wherein in the absence of job opportunities after completing their graduation, youth from Dharamshala have migrated to various locations in search of employment. They have spent some years there, collected some money to come back and start a venture of their own. This is precisely because with their existing educational qualification, jobs in the formal sector would be out of bounds and thus turning towards the informal sector to earn a living seems plausible. Exposure to the outside world and the varied cultures have made the service providers receptive to the outside cultures. Their attitude to adapt and the bricolage of their talents have helped them acquire entrepreneurial skills.

Yoga tourism is a purely transactional activity as well as a relationship between the customer and the service provider. Efforts have been made to explore Yoga (Aggarwal et al. 2008; Gupta 2008; Maddox 2015) and tourism (Lieberman, 2004; Jammu 2016; Telej and Gamble 2019). With the commodification of Yoga, the traditional methods of immersion through the *Guru-shishya parampara* have eroded. The small-scale cultural shop owners cannot meet their financial needs with the erratic pattern of business and thus almost each of them invests in ancillary business or ventures to serve as an additional source of income. Swaraj explained that he 'runs a voice-based domestic call centre which has its regional centre in Jammu wherein they work in data solutions, data mining, and develop customized software solutions. He does not believe that Yogis need to detach from the world they live in'. Another service

⁷ Personal communication with Yavna July 24, 2022 at upper Bhagsunag.

provider deals in making bamboo furniture during the lean season and also earns some extra money through network marketing/multi-level marketing. Others have their own homestays with in-house cafes, and kitchens to provide lodging and catering services which are also open to the general public for stay. Some own *dhabas*, *cafes* and some are involved in brokerage services (informally) with the hotel, lodge owners or locals who wish to rent their properties to tourists. In an illustrative case, Tribhuvan is an ideal example of a self-made entrepreneur who has made a 'business' in Yoga. Tribhuvan hails from Muzaffarpur in Bihar. He is 10th pass and claims to be a self-tutored and self-made man. He explained:

I was interested in learning about polymers, I studied it myself and set up a plasticware factory in Delhi. My wife is from Bhagsunag and we had land here but did not know what use to put to. Initially, we grew mushrooms here for years. Currently, we are in the wholesale business of garlic. In addition, we have started hydroponics farming wherein we are growing lettuce, coriander, tomatoes, gourd and other leafy vegetables. My aim is to open a salad bar in McLeod Ganj in the near future because there is a huge demand for it among the health-conscious crowd that visits.

Amidst all this, needs to be remembered that Tribhuvan is a Yoga teacher who before the Covid-19 pandemic had a full-fledged infrastructure established to run the teacher training courses and Yoga classes. After the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been difficult for him (and many others) to restart his Yoga business and thus, his inclination towards opening a salad bar. The discussion around Tribhuvan brings to fore the silver lining in the neoliberal systems wherein unskilled, less educated men like Tribhuvan have made a career in Yoga and meditation services utilizing the expanding forms of the cultural market. However, given the erratic nature of the Yoga business, they often have to involve themselves in other businesses to earn a decent living. During November-February, owing to harsh winters the tourist inflow decreases. This lean period of four months can greatly impact the Yoga and meditation business and to deal with this, majority of service providers relocate to sites such as Arambol in Goa and Rishikesh in Uttarakhand which are thronged by tourists during the winters. The well-to-do, better-established service providers from McLeod Ganj have established centres in Arambol, Rishikesh and Ubud in Bali and are fully functional from November to February (personal communication with several service providers) and travel to various parts of the world such as Cape Town, Argentina during this time to conduct Yoga and meditation programs. Those who do not have much capital to invest in another location, relocate and teach for these months. At the micro level, the erratic nature of the business of wellness centres illustrates a temporal horizon. The temporality in the context of wellness centres is linked with the socio-economic background of service providers, changing nature of market and geography of Dharamshala wherein Yoga and meditation is a 'seasonal' business. The growing networks of wellness centres lead to the fundamental

transformation of everyday life, urban landscape and economic activities in Himalayan towns. Nemeškal et al. (2020) argues that temporality gets shaped by residential and commercial suburbanization and in Dharamshala with the rise of wellness centres.

Conclusion

The cultural market in Dharamshala is summed up as '*Yog udyog hai*' (Yoga is a business)⁸. The commodification of Yoga is a rather recent phenomena and Gupta (2008) calls it soft 'power' that can be harnessed to attract global capital to India. The cultural market in Dharamshala is influenced by the global demands and forces, though the solutions are local and frugal. The young service providers in navigating through the recent shifts in the economy, rather than involve in "timepass" (Jeffrey 2010) turn into enterprising individuals participating in the market to earn a living. The enterprising individual "focus neither on resistance to discourses of entrepreneurialism nor on absorption of neoliberal ideas but, rather, on the creative reproduction and extension of notions of enterprise (Jeffrey and Young 185). The soft power of Yoga is well utilized by the unemployed youth to harness the opportunities provided by the market. The wellness centres are in contrast with the neoliberal economic enclaves that emphasizes on skills and educational qualifications to get a job. Working hard is not enough in order to surge ahead and the service providers move beyond the traditional methods of depending only on educational degrees to become successful (Mankekar 2013). The emerging market of wellness shops in the Himalayas provides an alternative to youth, which is largely linked with global aspirations, flexible market adaptability and localized solutions. The article has described the processes that contributed to the rise of wellness shops, mapping their function and alternative nature of business. The term 'back-up' economy has been coined to explain the entrepreneurial landscape of the wellness centres. It reverberates with the sites, ideas and practices of the service providers who are not only involved in the business of Yoga but also alternate means of making money. The young service providers not only take into account the seasonal nature of this business but also the uncertainty as well as the opportunity that is involved in the market. The service providers in light of shrinking government services and State support improvise however, due to retrenchment of security, they realize that 'Doing Yoga is not enough'. The article attempts to account, define and theorize these practices which are not confined to those in the geographical location of Dharamshala or Gaddis but the situation of many struggling with the evolving state-market practices and shrinking state support in post-reform India. We are always on the lookout for security and when that does not come through the state or opportunities in government services, the work in back-up economies become a source of income and employment. The back-up economy would resonate with larger ongoing phenomena in the country wherein such practices have been prevalent; but has become pronounced now. The methods and practices employed by the young entrepreneurs in Dharamshala

⁸ Personal communication with Mahi, August 10, 2022 at upper Bhagsunag.

contribute towards the literature on “everyday responses to neoliberal economic change” (Jeffrey and Young 184). It sheds light on the larger literature on youth and employment scenario which has been explored through the tropes of enterprise in post-reform India. Though the enterprise culture is what guides the individual to be self-dependent, self-responsible, the back-up economy would be helpful to understand the everyday practices and processes of survival in post-reform India.

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Gendered Identity in Community and Crafts of Himalayan Weavers

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Abstract

Historically, women have run the villages in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, while men sought employment in the more industrialized nearby states, in the absence of local industry or commercial farming. Women have long been the backbone of the rural society and economy of Uttarakhand. They have also been the primary practitioners of crafts and builders of community in the hills. Although some research has documented the role of women in Uttarakhand in the creation and sustenance of livelihoods in difficult geographies, no such research has been undertaken in the craft sector specifically, leaving a lacuna in our understanding of traditional socioeconomic structures in the hills that have been sustained for many centuries. This paper is an exploratory study into the gendered identities of the women weavers in the villages of Uttarakhand and how the practice of this craft has created expressions of gender identity in craft work and the community, at a local, stakeholder and village network level. We document a case study in an organized craft cluster in the state of Uttarakhand in India using ethnographic methods. We used a narrative inquiry methodology to gather insights in this remote craft cluster. Narrative inquiry helped us explore the lived experiences of these crafts- women, exploring their subjectivity and processes of sense-making. We gained deep insights into the construction of beliefs, notions, and community perceptions among them that contribute to their sense of self and social identity.

Keywords: Gendered identity, Women weavers, Ethnography, Himalayan study.

Introduction

The gendered identity of women in the difficult geographies of the Himalayan region of India has long been forged by traditional gender norms and expectations that have limited their agency and opportunities. More recently, practice of crafts and practice of crafts as livelihood has opened up pathways for women weavers to challenge these gendered identities and assert their agency in new ways. This study examines the experiences of women weavers in a Himalayan region who have gained financial independence through their craft work. This study seeks to understand how the practice of craft as livelihood has impacted these women's sense of self and their identity as gendered beings, and how they have gained voice and agency within the family and community.

Drawing on narrative inquiry as a methodology, the study uses ethnographic qualitative research methods to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of women weavers. In the absence of local industry or commercial farming, women have historically managed villages in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, while males have pursued employment in more industrialized neighboring states. Women have long been the backbone of Uttarakhand's rural society and economy. In the highlands, they have also been the primary practitioners of crafts and community builders. This study examines the ways in which these female weavers challenge traditional gender norms and expectations.

In the next section, we present a background to the formation of identity, and the formation of gendered identity in crafts, followed by a reflection of crafts and community in the hills of Uttarakhand. We then describe our methodology, followed by a discussion of the findings and the analysis. We conclude with our insights into the exploratory study and the way ahead.

Background

Formation of Identity

Identity has been theorized academically across a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. The social constructionist perspective views identity as a social construct that is created and maintained through social interactions and cultural norms, a product of socialization and cultural conditioning. Intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of different social identities, such as gender, race, class etc. Intersectionality recognizes that gendered identity cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of identity, and that individuals may experience discrimination and oppression based on multiple intersecting identities. Feminist theory challenges patriarchal norms and power structures, arguing that gendered identity is shaped by social and cultural factors, and perpetuated through gendered socialization and cultural practices. Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the role of unconscious processes in shaping identity, developing through early experiences and relationships. These diverse theoretical frameworks have contributed to the understanding of how gendered identity is shaped (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

Gendered Identity in Crafts

The development of gendered identity is a complex process, influenced by various social, cultural, and individual factors. In the case of women working in crafts, their gender identity may be shaped by their experiences and interactions within a male-dominated community, as well as their personal values and beliefs.

Practice of crafts for livelihood, has historically been associated with men and often excluded women from participating. However, over time, as men in the family migrated to urban areas in search of livelihoods, the women have increasingly become involved in crafts and have been able to challenge the gender norms that have traditionally defined crafts (Portisch, 2010). The development of gendered identity among women in crafts, therefore, is an

ongoing process that involves navigating through the complexities of gender roles and stereotypes in domestic and professional situations (Appadurai, 1988). This process may involve confronting and challenging gender norms, finding support and solidarity among other women in the community, and developing a sense of pride and confidence in their craft and their identity as practitioners of the craft.

The development of gender identity among women in crafts is not a one-dimensional process and can be impacted by other factors such as community, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Women who belong to marginalized communities may face additional barriers and challenges in developing a sense of identity beyond family and community (Dilley, 2004; Escobar, 2011). Identity moulds an individual's perception of self and their role in society. In the case of women, identity can also significantly impact their social and economic status, and more so their ability to exercise agency and participate in decision-making processes, at home and in the workplace. Research has shown that women who have a strong sense of self and positive identity are more disposed to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, and strive for individual purpose and aspirations (Chowdhury, 2019). This is in variance to women who internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs about their gender, experience self-doubt, low self-esteem, and feel a limited sense of agency (Za-man, 2018).

Identity can also impact a woman's place in her community, as it alters how others perceive her and interact with her. Research has shown that women seen as strong, confident, and capable are more likely to be respected and valued by their community members, while those who are viewed as passive, dependent, or subordinate may face negative perceptions and marginalization (Markowitz, 2001; Erickson & Bohan, 2018). Changes in a woman's identity can lead to alterations in power dynamics within her community. Women who gain economic independence through their craft are seen as capable. This makes the community more receptive to seeing her challenge traditional gender roles and assert agency in new ways (Chowdhury, 2019).

Crafts & Community in Remote Himalayan Areas

Remote geographies are known to create unique sociological environments and circumstances in the community. Community can be based on various factors, such as geography, ethnicity, religion, language, or shared experiences. Here we refer to community in the sense of a group of people who live in the same region, and thus share common characteristics, interests, or goals and who interact with one another in a meaningful way. In sociology, community is defined in terms of social relationships and networks. Sociologists underscore the importance of social dynamics and the ways in which they accord social cohesion and social capital. A community provides individuals with support, resources, and a sense of belonging.

Weaving as a craft has existed in Uttarakhand for many centuries, primarily working in coarse indigenous wool for clothes and quilts. It is one of the oldest crafts in the world, dating back to prehistoric times. Weaving involves interlacing yarn to create fabric. This primal application has meant that weaving has played a significant role in many cultures, and women

have been at the forefront of the craft when it was practiced for self-consumption. Weaving was traditionally a domestic activity, carried out by women in their homes or in small-scale workshops. In many cultures, weaving was considered women's work, and it has been seen as a way for women to contribute to their families and communities (Tolia, 2018). As weaving was commercialized and became a legitimate means of livelihood, men joined the ranks of weavers.

In India, women weavers have faced many challenges like low pay, lack of recognition for the craft, and limited access to markets. However, women led organizations and cooperatives have also been at the forefront of innovation in the field of weaving, developing new techniques and weaving patterns that have helped shape the craft and make it relevant in the present (Tolia, 2018). Taking it up as livelihood has provided women with a means of a steady income and achieving economic independence, which has helped to improve their social and economic status.

In many Himalayan communities, women weavers have formed cooperatives or associations to work together and share resources. Some of these groups have been incentivized by government schemes to promote cottage industry, self-help groups and micro business enterprises. The government has also organized skilling workshops and technical assistance in the form of more efficient and ergonomic infrastructure. These groups have provided women with a sense of community and support, and also organized access to markets and customers. The Government has also supported the development of markets and value chains for weaving products and fair-trade initiatives. Fair-trade promotes social and economic justice by ensuring that workers receive fair wages and good working conditions, and that their products are sold at a fair price without any exploitation by middlepersons. Fair trade communities have empowered women weavers who are often ill-equipped to deal with issues of wage and working conditions.

Narrative Inquiry & Visual Ethnography

Narrative inquiry is a research method that concentrates on the stories people tell about their experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences in order to obtain insight into their experiences, perspectives, and narratives regarding their work. Narrative knowledge is produced through tales of lived experience and the meanings people accord to them. A reflexive approach to visual ethnography is known to transcend boundaries between the researcher and participants (Turk, 2011). The multimodality of language and pictures together can lead to greater insights into ethnographic fieldwork. Images captured during visits to the participants' workplaces and homes can both reveal as well as conceal the gendered identity of the women (Strathern, 1993; Lehmann, 2012). Images captured contribute to the narrative outputs from the interviews, providing a pause for reflection on embodiment and skilled practice (Gowlland, 2015). Photographs can be external validations of the narratives collected (Engelke, 2008). However, Cant (2015) suggests that photographs go beyond that, carrying other forms of knowledge and stories in them. Studies in visual ethnography have looked at verbal and visual methods of communication in tandem when looking at crafts and producers of crafts (Henrici, 2003; Gowlland, 2015). In photographs there is a distinct separation between the camera and the subject, one becoming the viewer and the other, the viewed. By means of the production of meaning, knowledge is also produced, which is connected to power. Turk (2011)

states the action of taking a photograph is not just the creation of a visual record, but also the creation of knowledge. An ethnographic photograph is one where the researcher can derive useful and meaningful visual information (Harper, 2022). A multimodal combination of various modes of knowledge including interview recordings and photographs provides multiple paths to gain insight into different participants' perspectives (Pink 2005). Photographs are inherently reflexive, a moment in time for the photographer at the time of the research encounter (Pink, 2005). The meaning is not fixed, but can be derived with the context provided by the interviews. Thus the use of narrative inquiry & ethnographic photographic methods can lead to detailed insights.

In the next section we detail our methodological framework and the methods we used to conduct this study.

Methods

This research is an exploratory study into the gendered identities of the women weavers in the villages of Uttarakhand and how the practice of this craft has created expressions of gender identity in craft work and the community, at a local, stakeholder and village network level. We document a case study in an organized craft cluster in the state of Uttarakhand in India using ethnographic methods. We used a narrative inquiry methodology to gather insights in this remote craft cluster.

Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that focuses on the stories people tell about their experiences, and the meanings they attach to those experiences, to gain insights into their experiences, perspectives, and narratives about their work. Through this approach, we tried to identify a range of themes and patterns in the weavers' stories, which shed light on their lived experiences, challenges, and opportunities as women weavers in this region.

We selected the oldest and largest women weavers' cluster in the state for the case study. The society was founded by a very motivated woman entrepreneur and weaver who hailed from the area. Subsequently, it went through financial straits and was bailed out by a partnership between a charitable foundation and the state government. At one time the number of women weavers linked to this society exceeded five hundred. The number has reduced to several hundred now. The society has diversified its products and is trying to reach new markets to boost sales.

We obtained explicit consent from all participants who were observed and interviewed to use their names and photographs for academic research. All interviews were recorded for later transcription. The team of researchers observed the women weavers at work in the remotely situated workshop of the society without intruding on their space or work. The method of observation study was selected to familiarize the research team with the daily tasks and processes in the society, and also to break the ice between researchers and the women weavers.

This observation study was followed by interviews with some craftswomen to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives. The craftswomen were invited on voluntary basis, weavers were chosen from each skill level, the expert artisans with 25 years of experience and above, the skilled artisans with 15 years of experience and above, the semi-skilled artisans with 5-10 years of experience, and the trainee artisans with 5 years of weaving experience or lower. This helped ensure that they were representative of the broader population of craftswomen in the region. The interviews were conducted in a group so participants could supplement each other's responses. Some responses served as prompts for further discussion within the group. The interview was semi-structured with a set of prepared questions to elicit rich and nuanced data. The interviews were conducted during a break in a secluded space within the campus of the workshop so that the craftswomen felt comfortable and safe sharing their stories and experiences.

The interviews were transcribed and key insights were recorded by the researchers. These were further analyzed and discussed to produce exploratory themes that will be used to guide the future studies in the project. The photographs recorded during the observation study were used to support the insights from the interviews.

The researchers were careful to avoid researcher bias and maintain reflexivity throughout the data analysis process through joint sessions and discussion.

In the next section we discuss our findings and analyze them.

Findings & Discussion

One of the main themes that emerged from our exploratory study was the importance of weaving as a source of livelihood and cultural identity for the women weavers. Weaving has been a part of their cultural traditions in the hills for generations, but they were the first generations in their communities who were making their livelihood through it. In the past, it had been a domestic activity for productive free time. However, women in difficult geographies do not have access to many other income-generating opportunities, so the monetization of this crafting activity was a natural progression. Having a regular source of income through the society has given these women weavers both social and economic confidence. They feel they have a higher say in the family's decisions now. They have also been instrumental in enrolling neighbours and extended family members to the fold.



FIGURE 1 - WOMEN CONVERSE WHILE SPINNING NATURAL WOOL INTO YARN FOR WEAVING

However, ironically, they hesitate in having their own offspring join the society. Further probing led to reflections on craft being seen as blue-collar labour in their community while jobs in municipal government or school teaching are seen as white-collar positions for the educated. Many of the women weavers use their incomes to supplement the family budget, where all of them mentioned children's education related expenses as their primary expense. Weaving has given these women social capital and social confidence but they think of it as an activity for those without education and few livelihood options. These reservations are perhaps derived from the perceptions of craft and service in these rural communities where education and migration to urban areas is still seen as aspirational.



FIGURE 2 - WEAVING REQUIRES PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CONCENTRATION, ESPECIALLY WHEN NAVIGATING COMPLEX PATTERNS

The second major theme which emerged from the conversations was that of the importance of flexibility of working hours for all of them. Most of these women were the primary caregivers to children and the elderly at their homes. The challenge of working office hours in the society has meant that often family members at home like older children, in-laws and sometimes, husbands, have had to step up in helping with domestic chores. The women seek flexibility in working hours, going as far as to set up their weaving looms at home because practicing a craft is in no way a guarantee of relief from other domestic duties. One of the participants mentioned how knitting can be practiced at home on your own terms but weaving needs a more concerted effort.



FIGURE 3 - WEAVERS GATHER AT A TRAINEE'S LOOM FOR GUIDING HER

Women are perhaps by nature gregarious and weaving can often be a solitary activity, even when their looms may be within close vicinity, due to the loud noise of running the loom. The weavers often take breaks in between to stretch out their limbs and also speak to neighbours and friends casually. In these short but regular breaks, they also help the new weavers with correcting error and difficult patterns. Often several of them converge on one loom and observe or talk while one woman weaves.



FIGURE 4 - FREQUENT BREAKS HELP THE WEAVERS STRETCH THEIR LIMBS AND ALSO AFFORD SOME TIME FOR SOCIAL EXCHANGES

One further theme which arose was how craft is perceived by these practitioners. Conversations with most participants revealed that they practice the craft only as a viable source of livelihood now, not for the sake of the craft. Even though many have been weaving at home for generations, born into a community in remote hilly villages, today they see it only as a means of generating livelihood. The products they weave out of expensive natural wool are too expensive for their own use. They use cheaper machine-made products bought from the market. But working on these expensive, exclusive products has given them a source of consistent income that has significantly contributed to household income. They appreciate the exclusivity of their handwoven products and are proud of the skill that goes into making them but during the interviews it came across that many of them do not feel a deeper bond of creation with their handiwork.



FIGURE 5 - THE PREVAILING MOOD IS GENERALLY UPBEAT WITH AFFABLE COLLEAGUES AND CO-WORKERS

Nonetheless, many weavers spoke about the joys and rewards of their work, especially the creative satisfaction. They also described the sense of community and solidarity that they feel with other weavers, and having a support group outside family. The 8-10 hours they spend together each day have helped create relationships with other weavers that have given them immense benefits of a community joined by skill rather than region or language. Overall, the insights from our observation study and interviews highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of women's weaving practices in the Himalayan region of India. Through the stories and narratives of these women weavers, we gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives, and the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploratory study on the gendered identity of women weavers in a Himalayan town has shed light on the transformative impact of financial independence and belonging to a skilled community on their agency and empowerment within the larger community, and their own family. The findings suggest that women weavers who have gained economic independence through their work are able to challenge traditional gender norms and expectations, and exercise greater control over their lives and decisions. Our study has revealed that weaving is not just a cultural tradition but a source of livelihood and identity for women in this community. Monetizing weaving has given these women both economic and social confidence, as they have a regular source of income and a say in family decisions. However, there is a perceived societal hierarchy that favors white-collar jobs over blue-collar crafting activities. Additionally, the women weavers desire flexibility in working hours, as they are often primary caregivers and responsible for domestic duties. Despite weaving being a solitary activity, the women enjoy the sense of community and support among fellow weavers. They appreciate the exclusivity of their handwoven products, but crafting is now primarily a means of generating income rather than a passion. Overall, the study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of women's weaving practices in the Himalayan region, shedding light on the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate.

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Cannibal Himalayas? Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

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Abstract

This paper examines Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* through the lens of cannibalism. It shows how Kincaid uses the cannibal scene or cannibal talk by using the discourse a la Hulme of the absolute foreignness of the locale and the threat that the locale poses to the traveler's life. Using Arens' study as a guide, it shows how blood-sucking is a crucial aspect of cannibal talk illustrated in Kincaid's text by the author's encounter with the leeches. Obeyeskere's study is used to argue that Kincaid's mission to replicate and reconstruct the Christian Garden of Eden through her seed hunting in the Himalayas, and her "socialization" with figures such as Columbus and Cook resurrect the colonial dichotomy of garden and wilderness, thereby giving a second life to the discourse of savage cannibal native which was so rampant in European narratives of explorations. There is a brief presence of cannibal counter-memory through which Kincaid seeks to address her self-alienation by braiding her identity with the women from the Himalayas.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, Himalayas, Cannibalism, Travel literature, Gardening.

In the "Introduction" to the book *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, Peter Hulme describes the varied phenomenon of anthropophagy first as the primal scene, then as "primarily a linguistic phenomenon," followed by "a trope of exceptional power" and finally as "ideology" (4). Extending Hulme's visual and performative idiom with a discursive metaphor of his own, Gananath Obeyesekere notes that the question of anthropophagy is "cannibal talk" which is mostly an imputation by Europeans "to the Other, the Savage, or the Alien that he is engaged in a tabooed practice of man-eating" (1). This paper accompanies Jamaica Kincaid on her journey to the Himalaya in order to examine her memoir through the lens of this discursive and ideological scene or talk of cannibalism.

To insinuate that Kincaid's seemingly harmless travel narrative, *Among Flowers*, has anything to do with cannibalism may prima facie look like a bit of a stretch. To the purists who might potentially object to tracing the cannibal scene and cannibal talk in this seemingly innocent narrative as too metaphoric to have any basis in reality, I would

like to urge them to consider the fact that there is nothing “factual” and empirically verifiable about the discourse or fantasy of cannibalism, which, even at its referential best, remains putative. Born out of the colonial interplay of difference, cannibalism is a trope which is inextricable from power and ideology, therefore it is always a subject for contestation and questioning.

Though the cannibal scene/talk in Kincaid is a trope, it is not exactly what is known as literary cannibalism, which is “an act wherein a postcolonial author ‘consumes’ canonical works of literature while concurrently serving as a complex and sophisticated means of dismantling the legacy of colonialism” (Reynolds 3). This scene of the cannibal in Kincaid, however, is not purely intertextual. Nor is the act of eating as clearly demarcated as a postcolonial writer consuming a canonical text. It differs also from a version of universal cannibalism that Maryse Condé refers to in her interview by remarking that “Nous sommes des cannibales . . . nous voulons absolument nous approprier l’autre, faire qu’il devient notre créature, en faire ce que nous voulons (quoted in Reynolds 1). As a postcolonial and/or Black immigrant American author herself, Kincaid’s depiction of the cannibal scene is more complicated than Condé’s sense of pan-cannibalism in which we all are cannibals and we absolutely appropriate the other by making him our creature so that he does what we want him to.

In contrast to literary cannibalism in which a postcolonial reader consumes and regurgitates Western canonical texts, and to pan-cannibalism in which the other is reshaped through incorporation or introjection, Kincaid’s scene of the cannibal marks a resurgence or continuation of a neocolonialist ideology. When making these propositions, we must not overlook the fact that Kincaid herself is a fierce critic of colonialism or that the “Himalaya,” usually a plural noun singularized by Kincaid and always a subject of imperial fascination, does not have a consistent and congruous relationship with colonialism. In fact, Nepal (for which “the Himalaya,” has been used as a metonym) where Kincaid visits to collect seeds for her garden in Vermont, USA, was never colonized. Jill Didur notes, Kincaid remains implicated in “gardening cultures’ colonial underpinnings” (175) and argues that Kincaid’s consumption of colonial botanical texts reroutes colonial botany. Adding to Didur’s sense of postcolonial revision, Pramod Nayar argues that if there is a counter-colonial narrative in Kincaid’s “neo-colonial” memoir, then it has to come from her text’s “discursive instability” or her being an uncertain traveler (5). The trope of the cannibal scene allows us to bring both her counter-colonialism and neocolonialism together.

Before we take a closer look at Kincaid’s memoir, it should be noted that both mythically, ecologically, and discursively, the Himalayas have always been cannibals. Just recall that famous scene from the Ramayana in which Hanuman is flying to the Himalayas in search of sanjeevani plant only to be waylaid by Kalanemi, who sends an apsara in the form of a crocodile to eat Hanuman alive. Those who are not touched by myths and are ecologically minded could read reports which depict the region as an

unmanageable graveyard (Nuwer). Adding to these two layers of anthropophagy is an economic human-eating – travelers exploiting local labor and Nepalese exploiting tourists to keep their economy afloat.

Born Elaine Potter Richardson on the island of Antigua in 1949, Jamaica Kincaid came to the U.S. at the age of 17 to work as an au pair to an American family. Though sent to be the breadwinner for the family, she refused to send the money home. Disconnected from her mother, she invented a new identity for herself. She found a place for herself at the *New Yorker*, where the editor, William Shawn was impressed by her writing and what she had to say. She became a regular featured writer with her own column “The Talk of the Town.” She went on to marry the Editor’s son with whom she had two children.

With the publication of *Among Flowers*, she comes back full circle as it were from *A Small Place* (1988) to write about travel and tourism. *Among Flowers* follows Kincaid’s 1999 personal narrative on the theme of gardening, *My Garden*. In between she wrote novels including *Lucy*, *Autobiography of my Mother*, *My Brother*, all preceding *Annie John* (1985) By theorizing the figure of the traveler in *A Small Place*, Kincaid herself provides a comparative model and a point of departure for us to analyze her book on the Himalayas.

An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness. (17)

The protagonist of *Among Flowers* is not an ugly empty thing. A stupid and rubbish tourist merely gazes at and objectifies things; s/he does not write a book about the destination. And yet, there is a strong presence of the tourist in the book, and that element is exemplified by the mission of the book – seeds for a garden in Vermont. Moira Fergusson argues that in *A Small Place*, Kincaid portrays tourists as “a collective Columbus, new colonists, brash cultural invaders” (16). Fergusson reveals this crucial dimension of *A Small Place*, a dimension also shared by *Among Flowers* in which Columbus and the garden play such an important role (I will come to that later). Before that, however, I would like to point out one important chiasmus here between Columbus’ New World and Kincaid’s Himalaya. What repeats in this chiasmus is the concept of the garden, and the reversed order that this chiasmus is constructed with is that whereas for Columbus a Biblical Garden is imposed on the wilderness of the New World, for Kincaid a piece or seed from the Himalayan wilderness is introduced to an already established garden. A seemingly minor difference, but one that could have some insightful consequences for the angle that we are using to look at Kincaid’s memoir. Horticulture in Columbus’ case displaces the perceived cannibalism of the native

population of the New World; Kincaid's romantic search for a piece of wilderness to be brought back to her garden in Vermont leaves the source wide open for a fantasy of cannibalism to germinate and haunt her narrative.

If the tourist and exploration or discovery narratives cannot approximate the account we encounter in *Among Flowers*, neither does the Contact Zone model, which implies a colonial frontier, therefore lacks sophistication in which a traveler might be someone like Jamaica Kincaid with her visibly marked racial, ethnic and gendered body. As the concept of the contact zone is a linguistic model, its focus is on communication rather than wounding, blood, violence, and affects.

The cannibal scene/talk model - both general and very specific (general because I understand the model to imply, on the one hand, a *Western discourse on the other*, and the *fact, fear*, and the *ritual* of being eaten alive; and on the other hand, going beyond this west and the other dichotomy, and bringing in a Foucauldian conceptualization of cannibalism that he develops in *Abnormal* - the creation of monsters that is the effect of modernity leading to the disciplining of governmentality. The disciplines that make this transition possible include anthropology, especially ethnology. Let's go now and take a walk in the Himalaya with Kincaid in order to examine the cannibal scene that haunts her narrative.

Hulme defines the "primal scene of cannibalism" as an "aftermath" witnessed by Westerners, in opposition to its "performance" (2). The cannibal scene in Kincaid by contrast is at once, an aftermath, performance, and forecast. The plot of this archetypical scene starts as soon as Kincaid is approached with the plan to go seed hunting in Nepal. She remembers her recent similar trip to China and reveals that in comparison to what transpired in the Himalaya, her China trip was "a luxurious kind," especially because "[n]ot once was my life really in danger" (2). Kincaid opens the narrative with this foreboding remark (which represents a forecast of the impending doom), and recalls the email of her would-be travelling companion as if he had witnessed all these: "Have you heard of the plane crashing and the bus going off the road in the floods, all in Nepal?" (6). She delivers the proof of the threat to her life, as if it were a performance, by pointing out that as soon as she lands in Kathmandu bats and rats, especially the former which she is afraid could be "settling into my hair" (19). Though not exactly acts of anthropophagy, all these instances function as props for the cannibal scene or cannibal talk.

In *The Man-Eating Myth*, William Arens recounts an incident of being called a blood-sucker in Tanzania where Africans use this epithet for Europeans to express their conviction that "African vitality" is being literally consumed by Europeans (13). Arens uses this encounter to show how the myth of cannibalism proliferates in disciplines such as anthropology. Regardless of the basis of such myth, blood sucking remains a prominent descriptor of the cannibal scene/talk. A few days after Kincaid sets out for a

“walk” in the Himalaya, she comes upon an army of leeches. The encounter takes place in the hill overlooking the Arun river, where Kincaid and her friends decide to camp for the night. No sooner than they had felt a sense of relief at finding a place to camp, then:

[S]omeone pointed out a leech and then another and then another, and soon we realized that we would camp, we would spend the night in a field full of leeches. Immediately as we entered this area, we were attacked by them. At first, it was just one or two seen on the ground, then leaping onto our legs. Then we realized they were everywhere. (85)

This scene of attack by the leeches and Kincaid’s description of falling victim to the attack – she believes that the leeches are “eagerly burrowing into our thick hiking socks, trying to get some of our very expensive first-world blood” (73) - exceed the conventional framework both of travel narratives and contact zone narratives. This is why it exceeds travel narratives: In *Abroad*, Paul Fussell notes:

Before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration. Each is roughly assignable to its own age in modern history; exploration belongs to the Renaissance, travel belongs to the bourgeois age, tourism to our proletarian moment. (38)

As Fussell himself admits, there are frequent overlaps: thematic as well as historical. In light of Fussell’s categories, Kincaid seems more like an explorer than a tourist. The figure of the gardener that she portrays brings her close to Columbus and Jefferson while her walk among the flowers in the Himalaya reminds of Thoreau or other travelers in exotic places. Kincaid herself makes these associations. In her essay, “The Disturbances of the Garden,” she recalls her fascination with the Book of Genesis, especially the story of God’s creation of a garden and its division into two distinct parts the Tree of Life (agriculture) and the Tree of Knowledge (horticulture). One stands for good, the other for evil, things forbidden. One signifies the bare necessities of life, the other implies desire beyond needs. This second category of gardening, which led to the fall of man is what Kincaid calls a heap of disturbance insofar as it reminds her of her “ancestors’ violent removal from an Eden” – Africa (Kincaid). Then she adds a startling and disturbing paragraph in the essay on how Columbus’ arrival in the New World is a parallel move from the Tree of Life to the Tree of Knowledge, hence conquest as fall but also an opportunity to rebuild the garden in America.

She acknowledges that Columbus’ arrival in the West Indies and his encounter with the indigenous population “changed the world of the garden” (Kincaid). Interestingly, though, this change is described by Kincaid not as parallel to the fall she described in relation to the forced migration of slaves from Africa, but in relation to the possibility of transplanting of fruits, flowers, and herbs across the globe. That is why the model of the contact zone narrative cannot be employed to analyze *Among Flowers*. In

Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as:

The space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6)

Instead of focusing on the conditions of coercion, conflict, and inequality, Kincaid uses a colonialist vantage point to highlight the movement of seeds and plants across the globe and across different languages and knowledge systems. Kincaid's encounter with the leeches blurs the distinction between exploration, travel, and tourism, bringing together the confluence of the romantic and the grotesque, and modernist narratives of the self and its post-modernist parody.

A similar framing of the garden in terms of the Book of Genesis takes place in Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*. In the concluding chapter of that book, she chronicles her experience seed-plant hunting in China, she wonders "if I was in the original garden . . . Eden," but quickly adds, "only this time turned inside out, only this time (in China) the garden was in a state of banishment; I was in the wild" (226). Two intensely problematic issues emerge from such framing: i) every garden does not have to be the original garden, especially ones in Nepal or China - countries where Biblical framing of things is not culturally predominant; ii) the rhetoric of wild vs. domestic flirts with the colonial rhetoric of America as the virgin land, and natives as wild, cannibal savages. In *Cannibal Talk*, Obeyesekere argues that the origin of cannibal talk often lies in the "European socialization" of the period of exploration and seafaring; it is a discourse that results from "a subculture of sailors with a tradition of the practice of anthropophagy that in turn gets locked into the primordial fantasy" (43). Kincaid's fantasies of being in the wild, blood-sucking, and life-threatening Himalayan terrain are the product of the colonial company (socialization) she keeps - Adam, Eve, Columbus, Cook, etc.

So far, in this article, I have shown how Kincaid's *Among Flowers* uses the cannibal scene or cannibal talk to look at the Himalayas. This is done in the book, I have argued, by using the discourse a la Hulme of absolute foreignness of the locale and the threat that the location poses to the traveler's life. Using Arens' study as my guide then I showed how blood-sucking is a crucial aspect of cannibal talk illustrated in Kincaid's text by the author's encounter with the leeches. I cited Obeyesekere as my third step in the analysis of cannibal Himalaya to argue that Kincaid's mission to replicate and reconstruct the Christian garden of Eden through her seed hunting in the Himalaya, and her "socialization" with figures such as Columbus and Cook resurrect the colonial dichotomy of garden and wilderness, thereby giving a second life to the discourse of savage cannibal native, a discourse so rampant in European narratives of explorations.

Two key differences between the theoretical sources and my own text of analysis and its contexts must be acknowledged here – i) Hulme, Arens, and Obeyesekere’s works focus primarily on regions such as Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and Pacific Islands. The Himalayan region is mostly absent from the anthropological and historical accounts of cannibalism. ii) All three studies quoted so far in support of our arguments that Kincaid employs the cannibal scene primarily involve Europeans engaged in cannibal talk on non-European, - often previously colonized, people and cultures. *Among Flowers* defies this binary by juxtaposing an African American writer depicting a place and people not colonized by any European power. To respond to these differences, though the Himalaya is not a region discussed in Western discourses on cannibalism, as we passingly referred to a scene from *The Ramayana*, insinuations of cannibalism are far from being completely foreign to the region. In fact, the Shaivite tradition within Hinduism, especially the Aghori order of Shaivite ascetics, has a close relationship to the region. One only needs to recall the description of “cruelty” and “savagery” associated with the Gorkha soldiers from this region (Gould 371) to gauge the importance of the cannibal scene when it comes to the Himalaya. Cannibal talk flourishes not just via the European-native binary but in cases where a non-Euroamerican speaker assumes the subject of enunciation as does Kincaid by claiming nativeness of the United States (84), thereby completely abandoning her roots in colonized Antigua or by ranking her blood higher and more precious (73).

In this section of the article, I would like to discuss a dimension of cannibal talk in *Among Flowers*, this time with the help of Michel Foucault’s discussion of cannibalism in *Abnormal*. To recapitulate our arguments, Kincaid’s narrative cannot be fully understood without engaging with the cannibal scene or talk. I have used cannibalism here generally and very specifically. By taking cannibalism “generally” I mean: the fear of being eaten, the “myth” (Arens) of anthropophagy: its mythogenic (i.e. divine hunger), pycogenic (psychosexual need), and physiogenic (natural hunger) roots. Cognizant of the fact that theorists sometimes draw a distinction between cannibalism and anthropophagy (e.g. Peter Hulme and Gananath Obeyesekere), I argue that the attack of the leeches again unsettles the boundary on the one hand between the fantasy that the other is going to eat us (cannibalism) and the “fact” of sucking out “the expensive first-world blood;” and on the other, between man-eating-man, and animals-eating-man. When cannibalism is in question, the supposedly “self-evident” distinction between man and animals disappears.

Kincaid’s narrative also contains a more specific manifestation of the cannibal scene inasmuch as it defines the “Western discourse of the Other” in terms of the return to nature, hence the title “Among Flowers,” which uncannily echoes the 17th century Puritan discourses of “the errand into the wilderness.” I would like to cite two theoretical sources here in support of my argument: First is Grotius from *The Right of War and Peace*:

The Hebrews have a proverb, *If there were no sovereign power, we should swallow up one another alive*. To which agrees that of St. Chrysostom, *Take away the Governor of States, men would be more savages than Brutes, not only biting but devouring one another* (Grotius 106).

Grotius uses sovereignty as a shield against the general cannibalism of the masses. The second example is from Foucault's *Abnormal*, which traces the construction of monstrosity in France to the revolutionary era of 18th century – where Foucault locates the production of double monstrosity: “the monster from below and the monster from above, the cannibalistic monster represented above all by the figure of the people in revolt, and the incestuous monster represented above all by the king” (Foucault 101)

What does it have to do with *Among Flowers*? If we see “the cannibal scene” of leeches burrowing deep in order to draw out “the expensive first-world blood,” we find that Kincaid situates the scene in the narrative strategically between two other encounters: with the Maoists and the Mountains. If the former are blood-thirsty, the latter contribute to the loss of orientation of self.

Kincaid suspects that Maoists may kill her; in fact, leeches were not the first to draw the blood in the narrative. Kincaid imagines her own blood projected onto the red drawings by the Maoists across the Himalayas. “It was just before we crossed the bridge,” she says, “that I saw some Nepali script and a drawing of a star (as in red star) in bright red ink on the concrete foundation of the bridge” (62). “Maoists, I thought,” she gasps, “at least here they are, this is a sign of them. They had forever been on my mind. . .” (62). She remembers Dan had told her that the Maoists were not killing foreigners. But she knows that “when someone starts killing people, though at first, they draw a line at the kind of people they will kill, eventually that line gets erased as they start killing some other people” (62).

Even when Kincaid was still in the capital city of Kathmandu before setting out for a walk in the Himalaya, she suspects that the Maoists “couldn't kill the king [so] they would kill me instead” (20). Kincaid posits herself as a totemic animal, which replaces the king and is intended for sacrifice by the Maoists, the cannibals in revolt. Throughout her adventure in the Himalaya, she feels suspended in the mountains between the monsters from above and the cannibals from below marking the slump of the region into the state of nature [which for some is the state of perpetual emergency whose logic demands the production of the sacred and totemic animal for killing]. Her fears for her life, her inability to read into the minds of the Maoists and the leeches, and the geographic adversity she encounters, make for her the measure of the extent to which the Himalaya *is* in a state of nature where Maoists, Mountains, and leeches have joined forces to consume other human beings. For Kincaid, the Himalayas interface the garden, which coincides with the state of nature itself.

A Foucauldian model of cannibalism, thus, not only unsettles the binary of the Western traveler producing the myth of the cannibal other, it also calls for an examination and offers the possibility of a critique of “bio-politics” involved in producing the truth about the figures of the cannibal monster. Seen in this light, Kincaid’s text engages in the production of a cannibal Himalaya bent on shedding her first-world blood and feasting upon it.

Is it an anthropological text, then? Foucault would argue that it is because like all anthropological texts on the “so-called primitive populations,” it is concerned with “the problem of the community of blood” (Foucault 102). In other words, as a narrative depicting a people in revolt, Kincaid’s text not only produces and documents the “truth” about cannibalism from below, by describing the author’s exposure to the consumption of her “expensive first-world blood,” it also raises the question which Foucault thinks haunts all anthropological texts – What should we eat or shouldn’t eat, and with whom should we enter into blood ties and with whom we shouldn’t?

If Kincaid’s text engages in the biopolitics of disciplining cannibalism – that is producing the truth of cannibalism – it is also involved in producing the subject of that discipline: namely the figure of the author or “traveler” constructed through the fear of being eaten by cannibals. Unlike traditional theorization of cannibalism in which the author/traveler – almost invariably white, European, male – produces the discourse of cannibalism as the discourse of the other, the figure of the author/traveler in Kincaid is produced by the discourse of cannibalism itself. After walking away from the Maoists and the leeches, which Kincaid confesses “became indistinguishable” in their demands “which we felt included our very lives” (90), and after climbing further up in the mountains, Kincaid is overtaken by a sense of loss of self, which she describes in a curious way:

When we reached Chyamtang . . . I came down with a case of loss of sense of self, but not only was this not new, I actually enjoy this state and were not for that, I really would be in a state of loss of sense of self. (95)

This Whitmanian current of offering oneself to be consumed produces in Kincaid the sense of self through losing oneself to the fear of the cannibal Himalaya. Cannibalism’s simultaneous production of the cannibal monster and the subject of the traveler/author bestows a positive and constructive meaning to cannibalism itself. As in the Foucauldian concept of power, which Foucault defines in terms of the total structure of actions representing not only their negative aspects including repression, domination and forbidding but also their productive and enabling aspects, the cannibal Himalaya in Kincaid functions as what a critic of Caribbean literature and cannibalism, Graham Huggan, calls the cannibal counter-memory to the hegemonic European record (126). The cannibal counter-memory in Kincaid emerges not only in her thoughts of being assaulted and endangered but curiously also through her identification with the people

she meets. Sometimes she encounters ghostly apparitions of her estranged mother in the women of Nepal, at other times Kincaid locates the hair she wears in the heads of the poor women from the Nepalese village. She can only conjure up her sense of self and body through these metonymic and partial fragments represented in the faces and bodies of the women in Nepal. This curious identification with the people, places, and the history of Nepal makes her narrative not auto-ethnography but an impossibility of ethnography as it exceeds notions of a stable, and autonomous self or body definable in terms of the anthropological logic of blood.

Kincaid captures this sense of exposure, incompleteness, grafting and incorporation of the other through her actions as a gardener. She concludes the text by remarking that the true ideal of a garden demands that she “populate it with plants from another side of the world” (189). Kincaid believes that the sense of loss of self or the fear of being consumed by the other inheres all encounters with the other. Cannibalism is inextricable from this notion of self which arises at the very moment of its consumption, incorporation, and grafting by and of the other.

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Himalayan Narratives: Cultural Reflections and Environmental Perceptions in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

This paper discusses the portrayal of the salient features of the Himalayan region in Indian writing in English. It aims to analyze the representation of the natural beauty, cultural diversity, and historical significance of the region through the works of various Indian authors writing in English. Particular attention is paid to the themes, characterization, and literary techniques that contribute to the literary representation of the Himalayan region. The paper also examines the role of the Himalayan region in shaping the narrative structure and thematic development of selected literary texts. The Himalayan region, comprising the highest mountain range in the world, has been a constant source of fascination and inspiration for writers, poets, and essayists alike. As part of Indian literature, Indian writing in English has captured the essence of the region in various ways, ranging from travelogues, poems, and novels to essays and short stories. The grandeur and mystique of the Himalayas have shaped the creative imagination of these writers, evoking a strong sense of place and identity. By examining some of the major works of Indian authors writing in English, one can perceive how the features of the Himalayan region have been poignantly and profoundly depicted.

Keywords: Himalayan Region, IWE, Identity Loss, Natural, Cultural and Historical Features.

The Himalayan region, home to a rich and vibrant culture, has intrigued scholars, writers, and travellers for centuries. Indian Writing in English (IWE) offers a unique perspective into the esoteric aspects of Himalayan culture. Examining select literary works, this paper aims to explore how IWE authors depict the esoteric elements of the Himalayan region and reveal its impact on the lives of the local population, as well as how it has inspired spiritual seekers from around the world. Nestled between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau, the Himalayan region is a mystical hotspot and a treasure trove for esoteric practices. With a cultural diversity fed by centuries of trade, migration, and spiritual voyages, the region has become an eclectic fusion of various religious and cultural dimensions. IWE authors present insights into the region's esoteric practices, ranging from spirituality and folklore to the mysterious and magical elements hidden in the mountains. These depictions unravel the unique worldview of the people

living in the Himalayas and serve as a source of inspiration for readers. Ruskin Bond's depiction of the Himalayas, in works such as *A Flight of Pigeons* and *The Blue Umbrella*, convey the inherent beauty and tranquillity of the mountains, encapsulating the emotional bond between the landscape and its inhabitants. His characters are deeply rooted in their surroundings, and through their experiences, the reader gains a unique perspective on life in the Himalayan region. In his novel *An Equal Music*, Seth weaves a tale of love, loss, and longing amidst the backdrop of the Himalayas. The picturesque setting of the mountains becomes an integral part of the novel, playing a vital role in character development and emphasizing themes of self-discovery and realization. Though not set entirely in the Himalayan region, Anjana Appachana's collection of short stories, *Incantations & Other Stories*, captures the customs, beliefs, and superstitions of individuals living near the mountains. The inclusion of folktales and oral traditions underscores the cultural distinctiveness of the region.

IWE works such as *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, *A Face in the Dark* by Ruskin Bond, and *Kora* by Tenzin Tsundue explore the themes of spiritual quests and seek to understand one's role in the grand scheme of existence. Tsundue's *Kora* revolves around a spiritual journey and portrays the cyclical nature of life through the metaphor of circling a pilgrimage site. Many IWE authors capture the rich folklore and cultural beliefs of the Himalayan region. For instance, Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* showcases the values of selflessness and compassion integral to the lives of the mountain people, while *The Room on the Roof* delves into the syncretic religious practices of the region. The Himalayan region, with its hidden valleys, sacred lakes, and rumoured Shangri-La, has long been associated with the mysterious and the magical. Authors such as Kipling and Bond subtly touch upon these esoteric aspects, alluding to supernatural powers and beings, like the Yeti, as part of the mountain culture. Indian Writing in English provides an invaluable window into the esoteric aspects of the Himalayan region. These literary works not only showcase the enchanting landscape of the area but also shed light on the region's unique culture and beliefs, presenting a captivating amalgamation of spirituality, folklore, and mysticism. Through such literary journeys, readers are granted a deeper understanding of a world vastly different from their own, leading to an appreciation of the region's distinct cultural milieu.

In recent years, literature from the Himalayan region has gained significant attention for its unique portrayal of culture, tradition, and the harsh realities of life in the mountains. The Himalayan region, spanning across India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, has long been a region rich in folklore, myth, and unique cultural practices. As global connectivity and technology reach even the most remote parts of the world, the region has come into the spotlight for its literature, which presents a vivid portrayal of the experiences of the people living in this fascinating and challenging environment. A rich repository of human interaction with nature, the Himalayan region offers unique cultural and traditional perspectives, which have been captured in IWE. The Himalayan region remains a source of fascination for writers and readers alike due to its rich cultural heritage and the unique amalgamation of various ethnic groups, languages, and

traditions. In recent times, Indian Writing in English has experienced a surge in capturing the vernacular essence of this region, through the works of authors such as Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh, and Jahnvi Barua.

Indian Writing in English has witnessed a plethora of talented authors, whose works resonate with the traditions and culture of the Himalayan region. Ruskin Bond's representation of the Himalayan region in works such as *A Flight of Pigeons* and *The Blue Umbrella* have allowed readers to delve into the essence of the hills, steeped in folklore and customs. In his book, *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh discusses the lives of fishermen in the Sundarbans while highlighting the region's natural, ecological, and linguistic diversity. Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth* juxtaposes the protagonist's inner transformation with the beauty of the Assamese countryside, its rich traditions, and socio-cultural nuances. Such types of works provide a wide canvas for the exploration of vernacular traditions in the Himalayan region, delivering an authentic portrayal of features like Oral traditions and folklore, Socio-cultural practices, Art, music, and dance forms, society's relationship with the region's ecological diversity, Local language and dialects, etc. The representation of vernacular traditions in Indian Writing in English, specifically in the context of the Himalayan region, serves to introduce college students aged 18-25 to the rich cultural heritage and ecological harmony embedded within this mesmerizing region. By capturing the essence of the hills in vivid details, prominent authors have immortalized the region's unique traditions and practices, helping college students expand their cultural horizons and better understand the intricacies of the diverse Indian terrain.

Several acclaimed Indian authors have written about their experiences or the lives of people living in the Himalayan region. Major works include novels, short stories, and travelogues. In examining these works within IWE, a variety of themes emerge that reveal the distinct experiences of the Himalayan people. These themes include:

- a. The impact of British rule: The British rule in India had significant effects on the Himalayan region, and many works discuss the local population's relationship with the British government and residents.
- b. The religious and spiritual aspects: The Himalayas are home to numerous sacred sites in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, attracting pilgrims from around the world. Writers often explore themes of spiritual growth, religious harmony, and the mystique of the Himalayas in their work.
- c. Environmental concerns: The Himalayan ecosystem is fragile, and the growing industrialization, urbanization, and climate change pose threats to the region. Works in IWE frequently discuss these issues and their effects on communities, dependent on the natural environment.
- d. Cultural diversity: The Himalayan region hosts people from various ethnic backgrounds, languages, and cultural practices. Writers often celebrate their rich,

diverse heritage while highlighting social issues stemming from migration, discrimination, and inter-cultural differences.

It is worth mentioning that many of the authors in IWE who have written about the Himalayan region have a personal connection to the area. For instance, Ruskin Bond and Rumer Godden both lived in the region and have used their own experiences to inform their writing. Additionally, works like *The Snow Leopard* and *The Great Arc* reflect an outsider perspective, aiding in understanding how the Himalayas and its people have been portrayed to non-local readers. Indian Writing in English has played a significant role in describing the historical experiences of people living in the Himalayan region. Acclaimed works have painted vivid pictures of life, customs, and the unique ethos of the area. Through these works, readers have been exposed to the rich cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and contemporary issues faced by the region's inhabitants. By studying these works, one can appreciate the historical narratives embedded within Indian Writing in English and the people of the great Himalayas.

Authors in this genre highlight the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental changes that the region undergoes as it interacts with global systems. Various works of prominent authors in contemporary Indian writing in English specifically deal with the lives of people in the Himalayas. Through these works, authors shed light on how globalisation has influenced traditional ways of life and shaped contemporary issues in the region. The Himalayan region, often termed as the 'Ecological Tipping Point,' has frequently served as a literary canvas for contemporary Indian writing in English. The immense ecological wealth, cultural diversity, and relatively lesser explored areas of the region make it a subject of fascination for authors. With the advent of globalisation, the Himalayas have been exposed to rapid socio-economic and cultural changes, which has captured the attention of contemporary authors in Indian literature. Numerous authors in English have portrayed the economic impact of globalisation on the Himalayas, mainly through tourism and developmental policies. For instance, Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* depicts the influx of tourists in a small Himalayan town, which brings about a vital economic transformation in the place. Similarly, in Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, the arrival of foreign trekkers is seen as an opportunity for local businesses to prosper. The novel brings to the fore challenges faced by traditional artisans and traders in adjusting to the globalised markets and competitive pressures exerted by large players.

Indian literature discussing globalisation and the Himalayan region often centers around the erosion of cultural identity and tradition. For instance, Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* reflects the loss of traditional knowledge, skills, and belief systems in the Kinnaur valley due to exposure to globalisation. On the other hand, Mallika Kaur's *Rebuild Beginnings* highlights the challenges faced by local communities in maintaining their cultural identity amidst the rapid transformation brought by globalisation. The novel emphasizes the struggle of the protagonists in retaining their regional identity and traditional values while adapting to the modern world. The Himalayas and Climate Change Globalisation has significantly impacted the ecological

balance of the Himalayan region, a theme readily evident in contemporary Indian works in English. In his novel *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh sheds light on the ecological devastation and displacement caused by human interventions and global warming. Likewise, Priya Kapoor's *The Wetland Song* addresses pollution and deforestation in the Himalayas while portraying the risks faced by local communities under the pressure of globalisation-induced changes. The impact of globalisation on the Himalayan region in contemporary Indian writing in English is a complex and multi-faceted subject. Through the works discussed in this paper, it is evident that economic changes, socio-cultural transformations, and environmental concerns have been variously portrayed in the representations of the Himalayas. These works provide valuable insights into the repercussions of integrating traditional societies with global frameworks, highlighting the need for sustainability and cultural preservation amidst rapid change.

The Himalayan region is a fragile ecosystem, hosting vast biodiversity and glacial reserves. It is a vital source of water for India and neighboring countries. Climate change and environmental degradation have posed significant threats to the region's ecological balance. The relationship between literature and the environment is a crucial aspect of contemporary literary studies. Indian Writing in English has shown a marked shift in recent years, with landscape and ecology playing significant roles in storytelling. The works emphasize the inseparable connection between humans and their natural surroundings. The authors depict the struggles faced by indigenous communities in the face of environmental degradation. The writers advocate for the conservation of the Himalayan ecosystem and sustainable development in the region to maintain a balance between human progress and ecological harmony. The paper highlights the significance of environmental concerns raised in recent Indian Writing in English set in the Himalayas. By examining the works of prominent authors, it underlines the urgent need for ecological conservation and sustainable development in the fragile mountain landscape. As college students, it is essential to understand and appreciate the role of literature in generating awareness and shaping attitudes towards the environment.

Hinduism, with its pantheon of gods and goddesses and its diverse rituals and customs, is another central aspect of the religious beliefs of the Himalayan region depicted in IWIE. A host of literary texts like *The Inheritance of Loss*, *The Abode of Snow*, etc. delve into the myriad beliefs and practices that make up the Hindu worldview, ranging from the mythological stories to the themes of karma, dharma, and reincarnation. While Buddhism and Hinduism command a significant presence in the religious landscape of the Himalayan region, the area is also home to a plethora of local beliefs and practices. Works of IWIE like *Circle of Karma*, *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikhism*, frequently delve into the unique practices of the region, like animism, shamanism, and ancestor worship, showcasing how these beliefs are intricately tied to the community, land, and its natural resources. A wide array of religious beliefs and practices have been represented in the literary works of Indian Writing in English, shedding light on the intricate interplay of faith, culture, identity, and society within the Himalayan region. By analyzing the manner in which these beliefs are portrayed in

contemporary literary works, we can foster an appreciation for the region's complex religious landscape and gain insight into the factors that contribute to the enduring allure of the Himalayas in the hearts and minds of people around the world.

The Himalayan region boasts an unparalleled landscape - a blend of natural beauty entwined with rich cultural traditions. This unique environment impacts the perception and manifestation of gender roles within the region, diverging from the experiences of the Indian mainland. Manju Kapoor's *Custody*, Ruskin Bond's *Time Stops at Shamli*, Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows* and a host of other texts in IWIE have portrayed the essence of gender dynamics. They are a source of more comprehensive understanding of the Himalayan region through the portrayal of evolving and traditional gender roles. A common theme visible across these stories is the delineation of labor, with men entrusted with physically demanding tasks and women responsible for household chores. In *Custody*, we see the Himalayan woman Nisha, who labors tirelessly to maintain her home, exemplifying the traditional gender expectations in this society. The notion of maintaining family honor plays a prominent role in shaping characters' lives. *The Book of Shadows* delves deeply into this trope through Anuja, who grapples with her mother's expectations regarding the sanctity of marriage despite her abusive relationship with her husband. Despite pervasive traditional gender expectations, these works showcase characters actively seeking autonomy and empowerment. Featured in *Time Stops at Shamli*, Kamla represents a rare example of a Himalayan woman defying societal norms for her independence. The examination of the portrayal of gender roles in the Himalayan region through Indian Writing in English reveals fascinating insights into the intersection of tradition, societal expectations, and emerging empowerment.

The caste system has been a prominent feature of Indian society, deeply ingrained in the collective psyche and culture of the nation. While the caste system has been officially abolished, its remnants still exist, affecting the lives of millions of people, particularly in rural areas. The Himalayan region, a diverse and historically significant area, has been influenced by this caste-based hierarchy as well. It presents a unique perspective on the caste system due to its geography, culture, and social interactions. Over the years, Indian Writing in English has emerged as a strong platform for reflecting the realities and complexities of Indian society. Many prominent Indian writers have utilized their literary skills to address the caste system and its impact on individuals and communities. The writings of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, and Arundhati Roy, for instance, reflect different aspects of this system both explicitly and subtly. The Himalayan region has often been the backdrop for various literary works dealing with caste-related issues. The literature from this region showcases diverse and intricate socio-cultural aspects of the caste system, as they manifest in the unique geographical and cultural setting of the Himalayas. *Diamonds in the Snow* by Rashmi Singh Bisht focuses on the life of a young girl who had to endure the caste-based discrimination in her village situated in the Kumaon Hills. The protagonist's journey from a small village to a city highlights the caste system's impact on education and

opportunities for personal growth and development. The article “The Invisible Caste: Role of Culture and Values” by Madhu Kant Shrestha explores the role of culture and values in perpetuating the caste system in the Nepalese Himalayan region. Shrestha argues that the existing cultural values and traditions play a significant role in entrenching the caste system, making it difficult to eradicate. *Tales of the Himalayas* by Shivani Shivani's is a collection of short stories set in the foothills of the Himalayas, which provides valuable insights into the caste-based hierarchy and the lives of those living under its shadow. The stories explore various aspects of the caste system, such as arranged marriages, stigma, and limitations imposed by one's caste.

The caste system in India has been an integral aspect of the Hindu tradition and has significantly influenced the contours of the nation's social fabric. The caste hierarchies have led to glaring inequalities and widespread discrimination, deeply entrenched in the everyday lives of millions across the country. The Himalayan region, a unique geographic and cultural space, presents its distinct hierarchies woven within the caste system. The study of Indian writing in English with a focus on the portrayal of caste hierarchies in the Himalayan region is crucial in understanding the intricate connections between the social, political, and cultural dimensions of this region. *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy provides a vivid description of the social structure among the communities in the region, with the caste system being an ever-present element. *Nanda Devi: A Journey to the Last Sanctuary* by Hugh Thomson is a travel memoir. Exploring the Himalayas, the author offers an insightful account of the social dynamics in rural areas, including the impact of the caste system on the lives of the people. *The Buddha of the Brothel* by Kris Advaya offers an insightful account of the protagonist's encounter with the caste system in contemporary Himalayan societies, touching upon issues of untouchability, discrimination, and social prejudices.

The caste system in the Himalayan region is depicted as a highly prevalent and entrenched aspect of the traditional societies, affecting the social, economic, and political relationships among the people. The prejudices and practices associated with caste-based discrimination are manifested in various forms, from inter-caste marriages to untouchability, adversely impacting the lives of the disadvantaged castes in the region. The significance of individual and collective efforts to challenge the oppressive hierarchies of the caste system is highlighted, as protagonists and communities assert their desire for social change and emancipation. The intersection of caste with other forms of social stratification, such as gender and class, demonstrates the complexity of the hierarchies in the Himalayan region, giving rise to nuanced forms of discrimination and inequality. Thus, the portrayal of caste system hierarchies in the Himalayan region in Indian writing in English offers a unique perspective to comprehend the complexities and consequences of this social stratification among the communities in this distinctive landscape. The analysis reveals the deeply ingrained hierarchies, discrimination, and inequalities that permeate the lives of the people in the region, while also highlighting the resilience and resistance of those who strive for social justice and change. By understanding these portrayals of caste in Indian writing in English, readers can gain a

valuable understanding of the myriad social and cultural dimensions of the Himalayan region in contemporary times.

The Himalayan region has long been known for its geographical grandeur, rich culture, and diverse traditions. With the emergence of Indian Writing in English focusing on the region, various authors have provided literary insights into the socio-cultural issues and the lives of the various communities residing in the region. *The Folded Earth* focuses on the life of a woman named Maya, who moves to the Himalayan region to seek solace from her troubled past. The novel provides a deep understanding of the region's social dynamics, customs, and superstitions. It also highlights the issues of caste discrimination and environmental degradation. The famous novella *The Blue Umbrella* explores the themes of humanity, simplicity, and nature. Bond cleverly portrays the rural life of the mountain people and the social constraints that define their lives. The novella also delves into the theme of social hierarchy, presenting the clash between traditional ways and progressive thoughts. *The God of Small Things*, although not explicitly set in the Himalayan region, touches upon the theme of caste discrimination as part of the narrative. The novel provides critical insight into the social constraints faced by marginalized communities in India and grants an opportunity to explore the portrayal of social hierarchy transcending regional boundaries. *The Book of Shadows* is a novel about a young girl's experiences in the remote villages of Kumaon in the Himalayas. It discusses various social concerns including superstitions, taboos, and gender issues. The novel lays bare the intricacies of the social hierarchy in these communities, providing readers with an empathic understanding of the complexities of life in the mountains.

The portrayal of social hierarchies in these literary works highlights the intricate interplay of tradition, culture, and modernity in the Himalayan region. Through these novels, authors also depict the oppression and exploitation resulting from the caste system, gender inequality, and societal expectations. Moreover, the exploration of social hierarchies in the Himalayan region gains merit due to the unique cultural and socio-economic context of the region. Indian Writing in English enables these authors to reach a broader audience and contribute to global awareness about the challenges faced by different communities in this part of the world. Thus, the Indian Writing in English, focusing on the theme of social hierarchies in the Himalayan region, provides valuable insights into the social dynamics, and challenges faced by various communities residing in the region. By examining the works of prominent authors, this paper underlines the significance of literature in raising awareness about the intricate social issues and fostering a nuanced understanding of complex cultures. The Himalayan region has always been an enigmatic and intriguing place for many, owing to its majestic landscape with mountains, valleys, rivers, and unique culture. However, beneath the scenic beauty lies a diverse and complex social structure that affects the lives of people residing in this region. Literary works, such as Sunil Yapa's *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Manjushree Thapa's *The Tutor of History*, reveal the central theme of social hierarchies. Gender inequality as

a significant undercurrent in Himalayan social stratification. Themes such as caste system and gender inequality play a significant role in shaping the lives of people in these communities. An understanding of these social constructs is crucial for young individuals, as it creates an awareness of the realities faced by the people, promotes empathy, and encourages a broader perspective on Indian culture and traditions.

Indian Writing in English has significantly contributed to showcasing the diverse cultural heritage of India. The Himalayan region of India is a melting pot of diverse cultures, traditions, and languages. The unique social fabric of this region plays a crucial role in shaping the literature produced in the area. India is a land of immense diversity, and the Himalayan region is no exception. Spanning across five Indian states, the Himalayas are home to diverse ethnic groups, each with their unique customs, rituals, and languages. While the prominence of Indian writing in English has risen significantly in recent decades, the representation of the Himalayan region's rich cultural heritage remains relatively unexplored. Literary works like *The Himalayan Voices: An Anthology of Modern Nepali Literature*, edited by Michael J. Hutt, Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*, Sujit Banerjee's *In the Shadow of the Hills*- demonstrate the diverse cultural heritage of the Himalayan region in various ways. Many authors have incorporated descriptions of community-specific ceremonies celebrated in the region, such as Teej, wedding rituals, and shamanistic practices among different ethnic groups. A recurring theme in the Himalayan literature is the exploration of gender roles and family dynamics, which often emphasize reliance on traditional norms and values. Examples include discussions of matriarchy in some communities and the changing perspectives of younger generations. In many works, the authors have stressed the intricate connection between the Himalayan people's spiritual beliefs and their natural surroundings. These connections typically manifest in the form of sacred forests, deified mountains, and traditional myths and legends. The Himalayan region's linguistic diversity finds representation in these literary works through the use of regional language expressions or phrases, which provides a sense of authenticity to the description of the culture and environment. The Himalayan region's diverse cultural heritage is a vital aspect of Indian literature that deserves further attention and exploration.

Folk tales carry the cultural heritage and identity of a community, and the rich tradition of these tales in the Himalayas provides ample scope for literary representation. The Himalayan region boasts a rich repository of regional folk tales embracing the vibrant culture, beliefs, and traditions of the diverse communities residing in the region. Indian Writing in English has successfully adapted and retold these tales in a way that highlights the contemporary concerns and issues faced by the younger generation. Several novelists and short story writers have adopted regional folk tales in their works. For instance, Ruskin Bond's "A Flight of Pigeons" and "The Blue Umbrella" make use of the local stories of the Himalayan region. The oral tradition of storytelling has played a pivotal role in the representation of regional folk tales. Many works in IWE, such as *The God of Small Things*, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Haroun and*

the Sea of Stories have incorporated oral storytelling as a narrative technique. The various thematic issues addressed by these folk tales, such as social hierarchies, caste system, tradition vs. modernity, gender roles, environmental concerns, and the impact of globalization. Thus, the representation of regional folk tales of the Himalayan region in Indian Writing in English has touched upon various socio-cultural issues relevant to the younger generation. The employment of narrative techniques, such as the use of the oral tradition, has made these stories more relatable and accessible to the audiences. These folk tales not only preserve the rich cultural heritage of the region but also provide significant insights into the complexities of the contemporary world.

Cultural diversity plays a significant role in the development and preservation of a community's unique identity. The Himalayan region, shared amongst India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, is rich with linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity, in addition to its geographical significance. Indian Writing in English presents a growing platform to explore, understand, and appreciate the cultural diversity in Himalayan studies. The Himalaya, a vast mountain range stretching approximately 2,400 kilometers, is not only a geographical marvel but also a region steeped in cultural diversity. Encompassing parts of five countries - India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, and Pakistan - the Himalayas are home to various indigenous communities, each with their unique traditions, languages, beliefs, and ways of life. The immense cultural richness of this region has served as an inspiration for various authors, who have captured and depicted the diverse facets of Himalayan life in their works. Indian Writing in English, known for its global appeal, offers a broad platform to explore this cultural diversity through literature.

Ruskin Bond, a renowned author of Indian Writing in English, has been residing in the Himalayan town of Mussoorie, also known as 'Queen of Hills,' for over five decades. Bond's works center around life in the mountains, evoking vivid images of the cultural richness of the Himalayan region. His stories depict the lives of local people, their customs, and concerns, thus contributing to the collective understanding of the distinct Himalayan identity. *The Nanda Devi Affair* by Bill Aitken, an accomplished travel-writer, presents a fascinating account of his journey to the Nanda Devi, a Himalayan peak sacred to the people of Uttarakhand, in his work. The book delves into the cultural significance of the pilgrimage and its importance to the local people. Aitken effectively highlights the intricacies of the Himalayan belief system by providing compelling portrayals of the mythical tales, religious practices, and cultural traditions. *Custody* is a novel set in the contemporary urban landscape of Delhi, but the story unfolds with occasional excursions into the picturesque Himalayan towns of Shimla and Manali. While the primary focus is on the family dynamics and societal constructs, Kapur weaves the narrative of these excursions effectively to showcase the beauty and diversity of the Himalayan culture reigniting the readers' interest in the region. *The Book of Shadows* explores the hidden depths of the ancient Himalayan wisdom and spirituality, touching upon the esoteric aspects of the region's cultural fabric. It deftly

displays the intricacies and interconnectedness of the various Himalayan belief systems, creating a mysterious and fascinating world that draws the reader in.

A recurring theme in modern Indian Writing in English is the exploration of the self and the search for meaning through travels and experiences in the Himalayan region. One notable example is Ruskin Bond's work, where he has described his personal experiences while residing in the small towns of the Himalayas. His stories, such as "The Blue Umbrella" and "The Room on the Roof," capture the essence of life in the region while delving into the psychological and emotional dimensions of characters drawn from different walks of life. Another prominent trend in modern Indian literature is the emphasis on environmental issues, often portraying the Himalayas as the battleground for conservation and sustainable development. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, criticize the rampant mindless development endangering the fragile ecosystem of the Himalayas. Furthermore, modern Indian Writing in English highlights the importance of the Himalayan region as a confluence of diverse cultures and spiritual beliefs. These works often emphasize the transformative power of the Himalayas as a spiritual destination for seekers. It is evident that the portrayal of the Himalayan region in modern Indian Writing in English showcases contemporary themes and concerns, ranging from the search for personal meaning to environmental issues and the cultural melting pot of the region. Understanding these trends allows for a deeper appreciation of the significance of the Himalayas in the minds and hearts of not only Indian readers but also those reading them globally.

The Himalayan range is not only essential to the local ecology and economy but also exerts a profound impact on the cultures and traditions of those who inhabit its vast expanse. Indian authors have long been fascinated by the Himalayas, with its rich cultural practices, traditions, and folklore. Renowned authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, and Kiran Desai have incorporated Himalayan landscapes and culture into their works. The fragile ecology of the Himalayas has been the foundation of ecological literature in India, which deals with climate change, conservation, and preservation of biodiversity. The strategic geopolitical locale of the Himalayas delineates international border conflicts and highlights the significance of the region in global politics. Authors such as Arundhati Roy and Pankaj Mishra address these geopolitical concerns in their works, wherein this section extensively reviews those aspects. The Himalayan region's portrayal in Indian writing in English underscore the cultural, ecological, and political context that form the essence of the region's unique identity. These literary works allow young college students to grasp the richness and diversity of the Himalayas, fostering a better understanding of the natural and human-induced challenges faced by this fragile landscape.

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Review of *Everything the Light Touches* by Janice Pariat

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Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: **Everything the Light Touches**

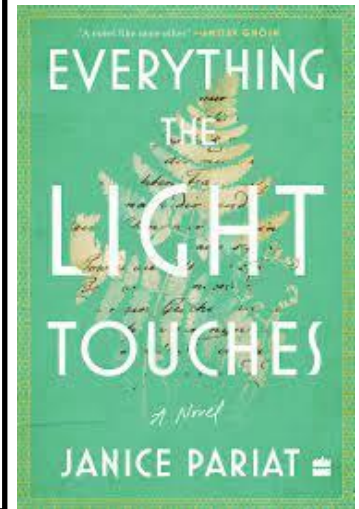
Author: **Janice Pariat**

Publisher: Harper Collins

Language: English

ISBN: 978-93-5629-139-3

Price: INR 799



Abstract

This review is a reflection on the latest novel by Janice Pariat *Everything The Light Touches* (2023), published by Harper Collins. The book is a work of fiction that tells the stories of four characters who are times and world apart yet the narrative has intricately woven them together through myths, legends, and a beautiful bond with botany.

Keywords: North-East, myth, legend, eco-criticism, identity

The novel is a historical fiction and is divided into seven parts between four characters where each character has a story of their own. The four characters are- Shai, Evelyn, Johann and Carl- the first two are fictional while Johann and Carl are Johann Von Goethe and Carl Linnaeus- both of them prominent figures in the study of botany. What is interesting is how each of these characters never intersect- their stories do not come together at any point in time as we follow through each of their individual journeys. The seven parts are named after the protagonist of that story- each character has a dedicated two part except for Carl who has one- and they are all told through different perspectives.

The first-person narrative for Shai, third person perspective for Evelyn and Johann while Carl's story is told through his diary entries while he was on his various journeys to find and classify plants across Europe.

As the novel opens with Shai's story, the reader is introduced to a woman who is on a journey home. Home here is Shillong, Meghalaya in the far North-East of India-an area that has of late come to be recognized as a homogenized whole, united by their geographical location for convenience's sake. Still evolving, still emerging and still highly debated in terms of culture, language, literature and the treatment meted out by what we know as mainland India. The story of Shai is written with an absolute sense of intimacy that can only be achieved by someone who has lived and breathed in a place to be familiar enough to write in such fluency- about its customs, its legends, its folklores, the myths that surrounds the hills of the wettest place on earth as well as the quirks that are unique to the place. From the very beginning, the plants, the trees and the forest - they take up space- the narrator describes them not just in passing but with a conscious and active attempt to make them more than mere bystanders in the narrative. From the character of Shai's father, who is actively engaged in "Growing plants and saving them, from frost and aphids and too much rain" (11), and now from human beings too. Pariat here poses as a critique on the rampant deforestation in the Himalayan region- however, what works is that the tone is not didactic but a general sort of commentary on the recent proceedings of a world which is grappling with capitalism on one hand and the growing environmental concerns on the other. The book can be read through the lense of eco-criticism to understand the hills and their relationship with the depleting forest and other natural resources. Throughout the novel, we find such commentary on contemporary issues -social, political as well as environmental and economic. The uranium mining and the health issues shrouded in mystery, the Khasi Students' Union, the agitation, the civil unrest on issues of "insider-outsider". Through Shai, we learn of the hills - seemingly calm but with an underbelly that is seething with unrest and uncertainty.

Shai's story is set in the present time but it does run parallel (not in terms of time but in ideology and the essence of a journey) with the stories of Evelyn, Johann and Carl. These characters and their stories make the readers reflect on the history, of the legends, of the myths- of the different stories of the people who believed in living the most sustainable life in harmony with nature, people who believed in taking only as much as was needed with no sense of owning, of proprietorship and no sense of making money out of nature. With the concept of "*Diengei*" as told in the legends and the folktales of the Khasi people- the tree that holds all tree, Pariat plays around with the ideas and the stories that are passed down from generation to generation via oral story-telling. This idea is then supplemented by Goethe's idea of a plant that encapsulates all plant forms- this is how the novel becomes whole because even when these characters never intersect- the ideas and the philosophy is what brings them all together- a connection that was not established through human bonds but with a passing down of

ideas, of stories and an innate desire to find, a curiosity to explore. That is how the characters and their stories merge together to create a beautiful painting- where each character may have been painted at separate points of times but they all fit together because they are bound by their shared love for plants, for botany and a fascination for things that held meaning that went beyond the realms of scientific temper. As Evie's character has this conversation with the *Nongiad* siblings on the importance of the "spoken word" how Evie is unable to grasp the concept of using words, using memory as the only tool to pass down customs, wisdom, advices and even contracts. "We give someone our word, we keep it. It is a matter of honour", (391) - says the *nongiad* sister Phyrnai to which Evie is visibly surprised. For her, a citizen of the British Empire, contracts and legal documents far outweigh the spoken word and she asks "what happens if one breaks the spoken word?" (391) to which the *Nongiad* sibling gives a simple answer which outweighs law and order and punishment- "You must live with yourself" (391). A simple way of life that desires nothing, harms no one and is based on the tenets of trust and generosity, like suggested by Goethe more than 100 years ago before this conversation happened- finding a more organic way of living, his quest for experiencing plants through knowing them in their honest simplicity - when they sprout, when they get the first leaf, when they upgrade to a stalk - their journey and not just scientific classification.

The narration is replete with Khasi words, casual mentions flowing out in actual conversations, and in the songs of the "*nong knia*". Whether Pariat does it intentionally- making the readers work for the meaning, as a tribute to her own roots- her Khasi heritage or simply making use of her artistic liberties without second thoughts- in any case it makes the novel come alive in its narration. By the end of it, I could feel some words rolling out of my mouth as I repeated them to listen what they sounded like to me. "*U Blei, Kumno? Khublei*" -words so alien in my mouth yet with a hint of familiarity that comes not from knowing someone but from hearing about them. As Shai tries to navigate her journey back home, we sense a woman who is confused about her identity as a Khasi. As one shop keeper asks her "Phi dei Khasi?" and she replies with a "Hoooid, yes, I am Khasi" (36), but what exactly does it mean to be Khasi- to be able to speak a language? To belong to a certain place? Or to belong to a specific race? Is it technical? Or are the distinctions arbitrary- we feel Shai asking these questions as she grapples with her own relationships with her home town, with her state, and her current situation as someone who belongs to the hills but has found a place in the plains. A question that plagues thousands of young individuals from the North-East who venture out for better education and better professional opportunities- where do we belong? Pariat, toys with this idea but of course, as readers we are allowed to make our own interpretations because as a story-teller she does not direct or dictate instead she nudges and she strokes, fueling curiosity, emboldening us to venture to seek our own adventures.

As a novel of 491 pages in total, it does touch on many subjects, we find commentary on imperialism, on religion, on Christianity and Christian missionaries who transformed the religious traditions of

the hills. Pariat has also gently shown us a comparison between the British regime with imperialist designs, keen to exploit and rule over distant lands against the *nongiads* - people who have nothing to own, nothing to gain except live freely as people of the earth, caretakers and guardians of our forests, valleys and rivers. The stories of Johann and Carl are brimming with botanical insights, philosophies and Goethe's very interesting views on life in general. With Evie's character she weaves the story of India under imperialist regime and brings back the history of the region, the explorations, the exploitations and the vast changes that occurred as a result of the 200 years of British occupancy. But the one prominent thread that runs the brightest is that of a journey, a journey of self-discovery lies at the core of the novel- Shai, Evelyn, Johann, Carl- all of them are shown as constantly moving, even their thoughts run like wild horses chasing the unseen. Pariat has managed to capture the history of the Shillong hills through the eyes of her characters who arrive there at different points in time- some as strangers while who have returned as strangers.

This essence- of a journey, of how human beings are not stationary beings, of how they are constantly moving, evolving, becoming- has been captured by Pariat in a tone that made me ponder on the possibilities that lie beyond our comfort zone. A lesson from the *nongiads*, nomads that used to run freely across the mountains and the valleys- foraging, collecting, conserving and never taking more than is necessary- this way of living - even if not possible today- but an inspiration to start living sustainably, by leaving nature as is and only using as much as is needed.

Pariat's novel has its base in the Himalayan region of the Khasi hills in North Eastern India but it also brings together the worlds of Goethe and Carl Linnaeus lending it a much Universal tone. The novelist combines history, botany, travel -a blend of fact and fiction that completes the book with magic realism as a narrative technique. The groundwork and the research required to make it so detailed definitely comes across to the reader as we hold this book in hand. It does touch upon a lot of subjects like the commentary on socio-political realities, environmental concerns as well as the strained relationship with its mother nation- India- it does stand a bit scattered owing to this but as a novel, there is a thematic unity in the ideas of identity and journey of self-discovery. However, this novel from Pariat will be helpful for scholars studying the many areas of the North-East within India- studying the many issues that surround its debated genealogy, it presents a nice backdrop for other works to be read and related to. Pariat has managed to create a phenomenal novel that will be a great contribution to Indian English literature in general.

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Vision through a Democratic Lens of Darjeeling: A Critical Reading of *Democracy in Darjeeling* by George Thadathil

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Name of the Book: **Democracy in Darjeeling**

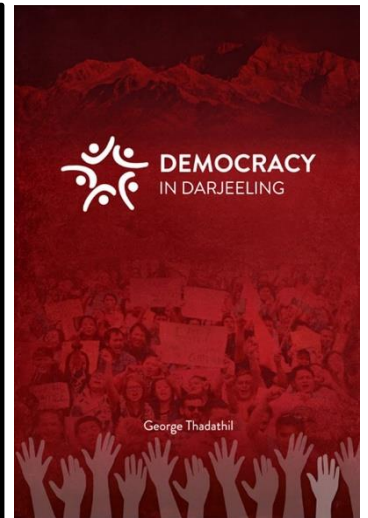
Author: **George Thadathil**

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Abstract

It is a review of the book *Democracy in Darjeeling* that is about the socio-political, philosophical, religious, and institutional growth in Darjeeling over the years. It is a careful study of the numerous educational patterns, community and cultural processes that define the plurality of the place, as well as retain the individual essence all throughout. Darjeeling is an integral metaphor in North Bengal, and it is not just a space, but a palpable entity in itself. Democracy, Pluralism and Globalisation have their own effects on Darjeeling and that is what the author has tried to enliven through his work.

Keywords: Democracy, Darjeeling Hills, Darjeeling Hill University, Society in Darjeeling, Darjeeling Religion, Pluralism.

In the introductory chapter 'Defining Democracy' in his book *Democracy*, writer and Reader in Politics at the University of Sheffield, Anthony Arblaster says,

"This perspective on democracy starts from the assumption that democracy is something which 'we' (in the West) already have, but are generously and idealistically anxious to export to less fortunate parts of the globe. To give an account of democracy will therefore be largely an exercise in description of current Western realities, coupled, perhaps, with some account of how this happy state of affairs came about." (Arblaster 2)

The Western concept of democracy has often been undermined and generalized as essentially a concept that bears a close resemblance to autonomy. It is imperative to understand how Democracy as a conceptualized and theoretical framework is deciphered, implemented, and interpreted according to the spatial, temporal, geo-political, and regional discourses. The current book that is under discussion, George Thadathil's *Democracy in Darjeeling* is both an inquiry and a repository of research-based outcomes that highlight give fresh insights about Darjeeling's society, history, culture, democratic ideals, and religious pluralism. The lucid description and cogent arguments about National aspirations and regional autonomy in Darjeeling remain at the core of discussion in the introductory segment of the book. The writer analyzes the socio-philosophical perspectives that drive political and community goals and try to generate a universal streak of indigenous rationality. Since the impact of imperialism and cultural colonization has been extremely strong in Darjeeling for a long time, nurturing and fortifying the community tools of autonomy becomes indispensable for larger sustenance. As Thadathil examines the concept of autonomy, identity, and equality, he points out:

"Underlying the aspirations of autonomy is first the desire for equality. The lurking memories of past inequality, which continue in different forms even in the present, fire the imagination of a people. Autonomy is therefore a political expression arising from a psychological, social perception of right individually and collectively." (Thadathil 7)

What defines the underlying currents and redistribution of the theory of democracy among the people of the hills? What about the dominant communities and the marginalized ones? How does one dissect the demand for autonomy by the hill people and the small associations that are formed? Do these associations spearhead the course of further movement to ensure democracy in Darjeeling? There can be these and myriad other questions about the designation and enjoyment of autonomy by an individual and a large community of people. As the discussion moves further, the author enumerates the different modes of language in which the people speak, and how there was a clarion call to introduce 'Nepali' as a type of communicative tool first as a medium of instruction in schools and then as an official language of the hills. It is true that the purity, efficacy, and singularity of any language get sandpapered over the course of time, as there are new discursive formations, various layers of dialect, and indigenous formation that make the entire concept of democracy multilayered. If it is a talk about globalization on a larger aspect, with far-reaching consequences of national and

regional trajectories that flourish on multiplicity and cultural binaries even for the smallest of communities, then we understand that purity of language over a period of time becomes mythical. The author narrates very skillfully the affective and political ramifications of language for the hill communities. Since Darjeeling has expanded over the years in terms of tourism, tea, and timber business, the influx of regional, national, and foreign tourists has also affected the passage of language. The author's sharp tone, descriptive articulation and clarity of expression kindles the reader's interest to know more about the cultural and affective aspects of a generation best represented in literary modes of expression:

“The construct of identity through literature has a past of its own. Every generation as it were, depicted the affectivity surrounding oneself and the collective self in poetic or prose articulations, in novels or in short stories, in dance, music and folk songs and these communicated to a distant land, people and time a sense of self identity, a people's sense of 'who they are' and it is this sensibility we try to define and pigeon-hole as social identity.” (Thadathil 21)

The author does not mince words, the objective dissemination of knowledge and resourceful findings collaborate with the idea of what Darjeeling was, how it has advanced over the years, and what the present situation of Darjeeling is. Oralities, written documentation, and fresher insights into the realms of Darjeeling are well-expressed by the author. The progress of postcoloniality has segregated regional monotony in writing, diasporic requirements have given birth to newer settlements that the new generations in Darjeeling are constantly trying to discover. In spite of that, the authenticity of the mother tongue by retaining the traditional norms, rituals, family practices, cultural phenomena, and literary outputs helped Darjeeling to grow in its own rights and measures. In this connection, one chapter of *Democracy in Darjeeling* definitely needs a special mention here, as the author has discussed. Chapter 5, titled 'Darjeeling Hill University: Emergence of a People' is a study takes into account the precise background idea of what a university is, what were the prerequisites to establish European universities, and Darjeeling as an ideal place to set up a university as there is a presence of a native 'polish', 'finesse' and 'wisdom' in the hills, that has developed over time. The impact of the colonial legacy and the proximity to the British had expedited the process of developing this fine, refined sensibility among the people of Darjeeling and adjoining areas. The dissemination of knowledge in schools, colleges, and universities is different. Christianity was also a major force, rather advocate for the advancement of English education in Darjeeling. Basic access to schools, colleges, and universities is one essential factor that needs to be taken into consideration. And with the passage of time, it is also about the utility and accessibility of education in terms of technology. Employees, buildings, funding, hostels, libraries, laboratories, modes of communication and conveyance and other such rational factors have to be kept in mind before the establishment of any educational set-up. The author writes:

“A college is local, like a school, whereas, a university has an inherent element of universality about it. it is universal (open to all) in the sense of welcoming people/ students and staff from all

over the world. This is indeed what characterizes the best universities of the world or of the country." (Thadathil 71)

It is true that the concept of *vidya* and *vidya kshetra* in Oriental terms has much to do with the overall cultural assimilation of several factors. A university is not just a building made of brick and mortar, but it is a constant effort to expand the horizons of practical knowledge. As the author writes very adroitly, there are several stakeholders in the smooth functioning of the process. If the government sanctions a certain amount for establishing the university, the work does not end there. Rather, it is about the educated parents, students, management, academics and the culturally enriched groups, and individuals who must affirm 'why' they need a university in the first place. The 'why', 'how', 'when' triumvirate should form the pivot of discussion in this connection. If there is unnecessary sloganeering and hooliganism and excess of political unrest in a university, that results in nothing but utter chaos and defamation for an academic system, and consequentially, instead of a sane representative of education, a Frankenstein is born whose actions are detrimental to any sort of academic accomplishment. Darjeeling has the complete set-up to kindle and inculcate a holistic goal among the students, helping them not just in class, but also in literary activities (setting up literary clubs), musical bonanzas, sports activities, and so on. This is a pluralistic approach, of course, retaining the individual essence of quality education in all its aspects.

American political scientist Theodore J. Lowi identifies the basic concept of pluralism in his discussion of the 'Pluralism Matrix' ('Plural Forms of Pluralism') as part of the edited volume *Pluralism: Developments in the Theory and Practice of Democracy*:

"Pluralism exists in the identities people develop out of the places, positions and cleavages they occupy. Pluralism is civil society wherever the separate identities are allowed to develop and express themselves." (Eisfeld 25)

Pluralism indicates diversity, and it is evident in the identities of the people and includes the fundamental right both to agree and dissent. Chapter 6 of *Democracy in Darjeeling* is titled 'Democratic Pluralism or Pluralistic Democracy: Colonial Legacies and Pos-colonial Possibilities' deals with a methodical approach and then a fundamental analysis of the multi-layered trajectory of Indian democracy, postcolonial identities, and the effect of pluralism. The post-independence scenario in the country was marked by a representation of the Bahujan and the Dalit parties, large-scale privatization, and liberalization of the economy and even the non-party groups occupying a place of prominence. The author diagnoses the plausible structures and implications of a pluralistic democracy, and how the preparatory ground for the amplification of the regional and national goals was made. The recognition of several languages, communities, and tribes in the hill areas also commingled with the recognition of their identities and through cultural patterns that were naturally practiced and that were not thrust by an external force. Along with that, the author also reflects upon the tectonic shifts that occurred in the Hindu and Christian beliefs of the 'good life':

“For the Christian, ‘good life’ is in the future, to be attained, worked for and striven after. For the Hindu, the good life is a pre-given an ordained position in society, not to be challenged or trampled upon. Therefore for one freedom consists in preserving the patrimony, tradition already given.” (Thadathil 100)

The next few chapters are about the process of democratization through civil society institutions in Darjeeling, history, culture, environment and development, a socio-religious description, and philosophical reading of *Dhajia*, the environment as a matrix for enabling cultural identity, the role of social sciences in the promotion of science, religion in Darjeeling, protest masks, religious pluralism, and movements. Each and every chapter highlights the forms of democratization that are a dominant force in cementing the cultural and religious legacies of Darjeeling. There is no abstract meandering that the author does, nor does he raise blatant political questions or insinuating remarks that might kindle religious fury. The book is a collector’s item in its own swift flow and expressional luminosity. The author has woven a fine tapestry with facts, insights, and philosophical reflections, free from didactic jargon and obscure educational rendering. The condition of the tea-garden workers, plantations covering a large area of Darjeeling, religious practices, and socially-sanctioned goals are not historically mundane, as the author corroborates. This book itself is a process, a process that emanates from an in-depth study of Darjeeling as a democratic entity, and not just a geopolitical ‘space’ in the strictest sense of the term. The role of the missionaries in the past and present, combined with the infringement of modern ideas that affect the dreams and aspirations of the youth of Darjeeling are bound to give rise to both cohabitation and competition. Arguments, and counter-arguments keep on resurfacing, but Darjeeling remains a Leviathan in its own dynamism, penning down its own stories relentlessly, projecting a unique identity and not hegemonized, petrified, or desiccated by the spectre of foreign invasion or globalization. Perhaps, therein lies the success of any true democracy, and Thadathil has expounded upon this truth with extreme flair and diligence.

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