



**litinfinitive**

ISSN-2582-0400 [Online]  
CODEN-LITIBR

[www.litinfinitive.com](http://www.litinfinitive.com)

**Litinfinitive Journal**

**Vol-V, Issue-II December 2023**



**Literature and**

**Cultural Studies**



Litinfinitive Journal  
Vol-5, Issue-2 | 2nd December, 2023  
Content

	Article Title	Authors	Pagination
	Content		
	Editorial	Sreetanwi Chakraborty	i-iii
1	Eco-consciousness in North-East Indian Indigenous Folktales	Sanarul Hoque Dr. Punyashree Panda	1-10
2	Brueghel, Van Gogh, and Chirico: Inter-Animation of Painting and Writing in Some Ekphrastic Poems	Sadia Binte Kausar	11-21
3	Tunde Kelani's Women: A Look at Patriarchy in Selected Nollywood Films through a Womanist's Len	Lillian Shoroye	22-32
4	The Marginalized Mudbloods and The Squibs of Hogwarts: A Study of 'Disability' Through A Medium of J.K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> Series	Debangana Basu Dr. Paromita Mukherjee	33-40
5	The Stage ( <i>RANGOMANCHO</i> ) An English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's article <i>RANGOMANCHO</i>	Dr Manish Prasad Dr Prasant Chakraborty	41-45
6	Precarity of Self: Identifying the Liminal Borders of Self in Shahnaz Bashir's <i>The Half Mother</i>	L. Swathi Dr. B. Padmanabhan	46-54
7	Reflection, Memory, and the Fine Art of Poetry: Reading <i>Memories of Words</i> by Jaydeep Sarangi	Sreetanwi Chakraborty	55-58
8	Reviewing Sohini Sen's <i>A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali</i>	Dr. Lalitha Sarma	59-62

## Editorial

### Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Editor-in-Chief – Litinfinitive Journal

Assistant Professor

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Mail ID: [litinfinitivejournal@gmail.com](mailto:litinfinitivejournal@gmail.com) | ORCID ID: [0000-0002-2936-222X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2936-222X)

The span of literature and cultural studies is multifaceted and multilayered. There are various parts of an existing tradition, culture, socio-linguistic patterns, and reverberations of ethnicity and race that are represented in literature. In civil society, there are various strands of functionality that are to be taken into account. With each change in the cultural paradigm, the range of literature can also get diversified. Litinfinitive Volume V, Issue II addresses these major instances of literary and cultural studies and how they can be incorporated as part of framing new postcolonial narratives. The first paper of this issue is titled *Eco-consciousness in North-East Indian Indigenous Folktales* written by Sanarul Hoque and Dr. Punyashree Panda, and this paper deals with the constant need for environmental preservation and restoration depending on the aesthetic and ecological balance in our surroundings. Traditional folktales, mythology, and stories that have been orally disseminated have the environment and ecological factors serving a significant socio-cultural role in the lives of the people. The writers have explored the effective utilization of land and territory as part of the self-growth process in the narratives of the Northeast. Anthropocentrism as a major component in cultural growth and development occupies a major role in the write-up.

Sadia Binte Kausar, lecturer in English from Dhaka, Bangladesh dwells at large on *Brueghel, Van Gogh and Chirico: Inter-Animation of Painting and Writing in some Ekphrastic Poems*. Her paper is a keen understanding of the nuanced patterns of Ekphrastic poems, and how as forms of art, they create mobilization among the readers. On the one hand, there is an idea of what art can create, and on the other hand, how art's metamorphosis into the finer realms of poetry can be interpreted. Even the most mundane images of human life signify something more fruitful when turned into Ekphrastic poems. When it comes to an in-depth understanding of literature and cultural studies, films usually convey a message in all its fluidity. Lillian Shoroye from Ibadan University, Nigeria takes an insight into *Tunde Kelani's Women: A Look at Patriarchy in Selected Nollywood Films through a Womanist's Lens* and she discusses the Nigerian director Tunde Kelani's major works *Thunderbolt* and *The Narrow Path* and the role of women in Kelani's films. Motion pictures, patriarchy, and the role of existential cultural practices- everything plays a major role in allowing the growth of a human being. She also narrates the intensity in elucidating the concept of talking back, resistance and the idea of female emancipation. Most of the films of Kelani are adapted from texts that highlight major social issues.

The next paper is titled *The Marginalized Mudbloods and The Squibs of Hogwarts: A Study of 'Disability' Through A Medium of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series* by Debangana Basu and Dr. Paromita Mukherjee. In it, the authors discuss the concepts of racism, stigma, marginalization, and disability studies that can be interpreted in terms of the *Harry Potter* series. Recognition of the disability groups and understanding of the concept of group identity and existence form a major study in their narrative. After this we have a paper titled *Precarity of Self: Identifying the Liminal Borders of Self in Shahnaz Bashir's The Half Mother* by L. Swathi and Dr. B. Padmanabhan. The paper takes into consideration a study of the precarity of people's lives in Kashmir. It is about border, location, and their idea of an individual existence that is a crucial deciding factor in allocating them a position in the global map. In this issue, we also have a translation and two book reviews. Dr. Manish Prasad and Dr. Prasant Chakraborty translate Rabindranath Tagore's *Rangomancho* from Bengali and highlight the major critical features that can be found in Tagore's idea of the stage. The central point of interest is how the *Jatra* as a theatrical form becomes popular among the audience and what socio-cultural function the *jatra* serves.

The first book review is Sohini Sen's *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali* by Dr. Lalitha Sarma where she discusses Tagore's original Bengali poems and the transcreation that Sohini Sen has poetically exemplified. Recontextualizing Sen's version of *Gitanjali* does not become an arduous task and there is no artificiality involved in the process of transcreation. The necessity for decolonization and a decolonial reading of the Bengali texts is a new way of truly re-reading the seminal text of Tagore. In this volume, I have also reviewed the poetic peregrination of Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi's book *Memories of Words* which is a fine tapestry of memory, space, self-actualization, and identity. The book is divided into three different segments and the poet uses stark images and symbols to highlight childhood days, cultural, and artistic patterns across various spaces and locales that have contributed to his mind's growth.

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

I express my 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

## Eco-consciousness in North-East Indian Indigenous Folktales

Sanarul Hoque<sup>1</sup>

Research Scholar, IIT Bhubaneswar.

Mail Id: [sanarul27@gmail.com](mailto:sanarul27@gmail.com) | Orcid- [0000-0003-2704-2895](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2704-2895)

Dr. Punyashree Panda<sup>2</sup>

Associate Professor, SHSS&M, IIT Bhubaneswar.

Mail Id: [punyashreepanda@gmail.com](mailto:punyashreepanda@gmail.com) | Orcid- [0000-0002-7027-9137](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7027-9137)

### Abstract

Environmental degradation is a severe threat to the existence of humanity as environment is the source of life for humanity, and the source itself is deteriorating every day due to insensate anthropocentric activities. To save environment from degradation, we need deep eco-consciousness, which recognizes nature as inherently valuable and emphasizes that humans must change their relationship with the ecology from materialistic usefulness to aesthetic and reverence. This study explores how North-East Indigenous discourse in the form of oral tradition, i.e., folktales, mythology, story, and epic, gives an account of Deep Ecology leading to eco-consciousness. It also seeks to answer how the Indigenous community's eco-spirituality is generally formed through cultural, social, and oral traditions that help create a sense of eco-friendly attitude towards the environment. The objective of this study is to critically analyze the Indigenous folktales from North-East Indian cultural contexts to find out the inherent implication of those tales. The intention is to ascertain whether North-East Indian Indigenous oral traditions formulate a collective consciousness regarding preserving and protecting the environment.

**Keywords:** Indigeneity, Eco-spirituality, Eco-consciousness, Orality

### Introduction

Environmental degradation is a severe issue for humanity which dangerously affects all species over the globe. Environmental degradation is the deterioration of natural resources such as air, water, and soil through humans' excessive and unregulated use of sources (Tyagi et al. 1491-1498). Global warming, climate change, and biodiversity loss are well-known environmental pollution results. However, few steps are taken by ordinary people and the government of different countries to minimize pollution, which is insufficient; for instance, in 2000, the Supreme Court of India directed all the cities in India to manage the waste materials to mitigate Environmental problems by segregating the waste materials and recycling and composting them (Maurya et al. 16). Although Environmental degradation affects all the universe's species, Indigenous people are affected most. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, development, and loss of biodiversity negatively impact the life of the Indigenous people due to their dependence on the environment, the resources of the land, and the territory. Besides the economic

loss, it also threatens the Indigenous community's culture, tradition, and knowledge worldwide (United Nations 2). Indigenous people's culture, language, and history vary from place to place. The only thing connecting all the Indigenous population in a single thread is being interconnected with nature, animals, and the Earth (McLauchlan 1). Indigenous people depend highly on their natural environment and forest for their livelihood. Cultivation, hunting, fishing, and collecting forest goods are their main economic pursuits (Saifullah et al. 96). As nature is the source of their livelihood, they worship nature. In an Indigenous lifestyle, each aspect of nature is worthy of reverence, and they worship it accordingly (Norgaard and Fenelon 477-494).

While mainstream society is achieving seemingly unattainable goals with the help of modern science and technology, it hardly thinks about serious issues like environmental degradation; till date, whatever different governments have taken as necessary measures all over the globe has proved beyond doubt to have been insufficient to control the ill effects of environmental degradation. World phenomena are changing rapidly; with it, social, political, and economic demography is also transforming speedily over the globe. Albeit such rapid change, Indigenous people are more conscious of nature and its associated species, which are closely affiliated to their life as compared to non-Indigenous people. The environment is the heart and soul of their livelihood, providing them with food and shelter and designating their identity as a whole. Indigenous people's social, political, economic, religious, cultural and ecological identity is broadly determined by their environment. Because of this diversity, a large number of the Indigenous community can be found over the globe. The socio-cultural variation in and between the Indigenous communities shapes the unique identity of the Indigenous community. Besides socio-cultural diversity, oral tradition in the form of myth, story, song, folk tale, music, and riddles, also plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the Indigenous people. As the Indigenous people live in the lap of nature, their lifestyle and oral tradition also fill with references to plants, animals, and supernatural elements. Animism, a belief system, is quite prevalent among many Indigenous communities over the globe. According to this belief, every object has a soul, and they communicate with others. This belief creates a sense of eco-friendly attitude toward the environment, which is also embodied in Indigenous folk tales. So, this study aims to figure out the link between eco-consciousness and the North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales and how these tales impart a sense of belongingness with nature and self-motivation to protect and preserve the ecology from further degradation. To analyze this interconnectedness, it critically analyses the different environmental elements symbolically presented in folk tales and also in modern North-East literary narration by inculcating these folk tales into their narration, which directly affects the conscious mind of the Indigenous people and helps store them in their subconscious minds and act spontaneously when necessary.

### **Necessity of Eco-consciousness and Indigenous Folk tales**

According to David Rothenberg, Anthropocentrism is the fundamental cause of Environmental Degradation as humanity is not separated from nature but is a unified whole (738). Although human nature and Ecological nature are the same entity, human



nature is destroying Ecological nature to satisfy its greed. Keeping the view of the present scenario, it is necessary to rethink the environmental saving process. A huge gap is significantly noticeable in the attitude towards the ecology among the non-Indigenous community all over the globe. Whereas the Indigenous community relatively more active in protecting and preserving the ecology, the non-Indigenous communities are indifferent regarding the ecological issues rather they are involved in deteriorating it (Snider et al. 2021). Ahi, Yaya and Ozsoy (2014) in their study finds out a positive relationship between environment and folk tales in different parts of the globe. Their analysis of visuals and children's literature from different parts of the globe shows that these narrations provide a positive attitude among the children in terms of creating a healthy bond with the environment (1-17). Indigenous communities have been managing the environment and natural resources for a long time globally, as they are closely associated with it (Richmond et al. 1041-1045). Mythology, folk tales, folklore, and story are not only the cornerstone of the culture and tradition of the Indigenous people but are also significant sources of the history of Indigenous people, which is richly informed by Indigenous prehistoric life, beliefs, and cultural systems (Deka 173-176). This deep consciousness regarding Ecology has been formed through the collective consciousness of the Indigenous people from time immemorial.

### **Deep Ecology and Environmental Degradation**

Deep Ecology refers to an environmental movement that emphasizes the inherent value of nature rather than pragmatic value and usefulness to human beings. With the development of science and technology and human progress, human beings' relationship with nature drastically changed over a period of time. In this era of the Anthropocene, Nature is no more a friend, philosopher, and guide; rather, it is the raw material of human development. Human civilization witnessed the dreadful effects of environmental degradation, which negatively affects both human and non-human beings as well as ecology. After observing this deteriorating relationship with nature, people start reevaluating their relationship with nature. As a result, the concept of Deep Ecology has come into being. The term was coined by a Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, in 1972 for the deep ecology social movement (Peter 2016). Rachel Carson's writing is also the founding inspiration of this movement as her writing expresses how human well-being is dependent on total biotic communities (Carson 1962). This human-environmental reciprocal well-being is getting disturbed by the human being and their greed for development, destroying the bond, which results in countless negative consequences for both. Mark Omorovie Ikeke (2020), with reference to the United Nations Development Programme, points out that Nigeria's main cause of biodiversity loss is the over-harvesting of natural resources, pollution, land-use change, and deforestation (82). In his article, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary", Arne Naess refers to the Western culture as the follower of the Shallow Movement as it exploits the nonhuman being and has detached them from the nature-centric fundamentals to exploitive centric (95-100). Deep Ecology not only focuses on the degradation of the environment but also emphasizes how to preserve it.

The vulnerable effects of environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity greatly affect the lives of the Indigenous people as they are close to nature. Indigenous people's "tradition and belief system often mean they regard nature with deep respect, and they have a strong sense of place and belonging." (United Nations Environment Programme 2). After reviewing the present condition of environment and role of Indigenous community on the different parts of the globe, this study tends to analyze the effects of Indigenous folk tales on the North-East Indian Indigenous community and its outcome in terms of eco-consciousness. In this regard, the sense of "belonging" is reflected in the socio-cultural activity of the North-East Indigenous community. Similarly, this analysis critically examines the Indigenous folk tales to understand how the oral tradition in North-East India promotes eco-consciousness among the community, which directly or indirectly motivates the Indigenous community to protect the environment.

### **North Eastern Indigenous Folk Tales and Eco-consciousness**

North Eastern region of India is geographically, socially, culturally, and demographically very significant. Diversity in terms of culture, tradition, demography and ethnicity makes this region quite vibrant. Multiplicity is the principal ethos of this region. Each group has its own language, culture, identity, and way of life. Other than ethnic diversity, ecological diversity is also another key factor in this region. This diversified multiplicity of ethnoecological aspects is reflected in their oral tradition, song, dance and music. As these people are lovers of song, music, and dance, their oral culture is also full of ecological references, which is socially, culturally, and economically intimately associated with their life. They also create the beauty of nature in their painting, textile, handicraft, and wood carving. North-East Indian poet Temsula Ao, in her poetry, figures out the unheard and unrepresented voices of the Naga Indigenous people who possessed extraordinary survival skills and had an innate awareness of nature's mysteries and wisdom which creates a sense of preserving and protecting the environment among the community (Jayashree 343-345). According to Jayashree, much of Temsula Ao's poetry deals with the eco-ethnic tone of the Indigenous community, which teaches the audience how to "protect" and "preserve" the ecology to sustain long-rooted socio-cultural diversity.

In the same way, the eco-consciousness of the Indigenous community also largely shaped their knowledge of nature and natural beings and their significance in their life. As they depend on nature and nonhuman beings for their survival, they know the value and importance of it. This sense of relevance and necessity of nonhuman beings and the environment motivates the Indigenous people to think about it and preserve it accordingly. Aboriginal, Indigenous, or other traditional knowledge on the sustainability of regional resources is referred to as traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge is a body of information, belief, and activity that has been passed down through the generations through traditional songs, stories, and beliefs and has evolved through the accumulation of traditional ecological knowledge. It is about how people interact with their surroundings and other living things, including the mainstream. This traditional knowledge system which is prevalent in folk



tale narration, has been adopted by the writers of the different ages in their writing to assimilate Indigenous culture, knowledge and art to the modern popular culture. By assimilating Indigenous culture to popular culture widen the periphery of knowledge which profoundly helps in creating consciousness among the people regarding ecology and its importance. The occurrence of natural phenomenon and the process of regeneration and degeneration was a great mystery to pre-historic human being. Being mysterious and inexplicable they assigned sacredness to those occurrences and formed an organized Animistic religious belief system (Ramakrishnan 154-156). In a given landscape, particular natural beauty, availability of the resources, occurrence of the natural calamities, animals, plants and river are connected to oral literature and transmitted from generation to generation. These tangible and intangible natural resources are not only part of their religious belief but also has a deep cultural connection too. The socio-cultural importance of animals and plants plays a significant role in the lives of the Indigenous people, which varies in different ethnic groups. Some Indigenous groups give more importance to plants, using them in different festivals and medicine to cure various diseases; at the same time, other Indigenous groups pay more value to animals as it is necessary to meet the demand for food. Krishna and Mukud (2023), in their study, by analyzing the “ethnic belief, customs, and different rituals of the tea tribe of Dibrugarh district of Assam in connection with sacred plants and animals” (1) finds that celebration of every ritual of the Indigenous community is centered around on a particular plants or animals. Bhaskar Roy Barman (2010), in his study, points out that “ecology greatly determines the condition of living and the influence of the pattern of thoughts and behaviour in tribal society and accounts for the differences that exist between one group and another” (20). However, some other Indigenous groups value animals and plants and preserve their importance through oral tradition. Moreover, the inherent religious, cultural, traditional and materialistic values of trees, plants, and animals motivate the North-East Indigenous community of India to revere the ecological elements in their environment as powerful entities and worship them accordingly. This ecological sacredness encourages the Indigenous people to preserve it in the form of folktales.

Animism is another important aspect of the Indigenous people of North East; in ancient times, when science and technology had not intervened in Indigenous lives as much as it does now, natural calamities and disasters were a great mystery to the North-East India Indigenous community. So, the Indigenous people imagined every natural element or occurrence as something powerful and sacred and started to worship those elements or occurrences. This legacy of Animism is still followed by the Indigenous community, which reflects in their contemporary religious belief system. Besides natural calamities, snakes, animals, and trees are deified and worshipped (Roy 23). In North East India, Indigenous people at the time of sowing seeds or harvesting the crops sing songs that convey their deep-rooted feelings and emotions connected with the landscape and environment where they live. The main themes of these folk tales are season, topography, eco-cultural values, and history. This is how Indigenous people transmit their values and ideas regarding nature and landscape to the young generation through



the oral tradition, which directly creates a sense of attachment to the environment. In North Eastern states like Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, numerous Indigenous folk tales and stories proclaim that plants and animals embody deities and ancestors and must not be harmed (Dey 14-27). Hence, this interconnectedness between nature and belief creates a sense of belongingness with the environment and motivates people to protect it. This interconnectedness and belongingness with nature and nonhuman beings are also prevalent in the Mizo myth, folk tale, and folklore. A Mizo myth, "The Myth of Rih", deals with human and ecological relationships. Rih, a mythological figure, is the protagonist who lives with her cruel father and stepmother. One day her father kills her younger sister in a deep forest. After finding out about the dead body of her sister, Rih starts to cry and hearing her cry, a good spirit comes to help her. After listening to her story, the spirit, with the help of a magical tree leaf, revives her sister's life. To quench her sister's thirst, she transforms into a small pool with the help of the same magical tree leaf. Then again, she transforms into a white Mithun and starts wandering here and there for her safety and permanent settlement. After loitering here and there, she decides to settle down in Khawthlir village in the form of a lake, now located in Myanmar (Raha 2). This Mizo mythology does not merely narrate the story of supernatural beings and deities; it also expresses their sense of identity and belongingness with nature. This sense of belongingness and unity with nature and nonhuman beings is also vibrant in Naga folk tales which create a sense of unity in diversity. In this context, the myth of "Man, Tiger, and Spirit" is very relevant. Naga people believe that the soul resides not in the human body but in an animal, especially in the tiger. According to them, the human soul wanders in the forest as a tiger, and they reunite with the human being in the latter's dream. They believe a man, a tiger, and a spirit were once blood brothers. When their mother died, they started to fight over their mother's worldly possessions. They planned to arrange a competition to settle the matter, but the man in guile won the competition and, being defeated, the tiger went to the forest to dwell. The spirit, being deceived by the man, curses him, and promises never to meet again (Kharmawphlang 160-176). In the archetypal memory of the Naga Indigenous community, this oneness with nature is celebrated through saving, protecting, and worshipping nature.

Contemporary writers like Mitra Pukhan, Tamsula Ao, Monalisha Changkija, Mamang Dai, Eastarine Kire, and Rashmi Narzary recollect and brings the Indigenous myth, song, folk tales, orality, and legend into the mainstream to reconstruct the Indigenous knowledge of nature, ecology, nonhuman, and profound philosophy of life. Although Mitra Phukan is not an Indigenous author, her writing reflects on the mythology and folktales of the Indigenous community of the North-East and presents them in a new form; for instance, her well-known text *The Collector's Wife. The Collector's Wife* (2005) is a story of turmoil and uncertainty set against the backdrop of the Assam insurgency, forcing the protagonist, Rukmini, to take shelter in the lap of nature for her spiritual awareness. It is only the ecology whose door is open to all for finding peace and serenity in the world of the hustle and bustle. The undercurrent of an ideal way of life through "back to nature" can also be found in Tamsula Ao's writing. Her short story



collection, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), idealised Indigenous living to show a contrasting picture of modern lifestyles contributing to disturbing local ecologies. She tries to foreground that in the ever-changing ecology, the only way to live in peace and harmony is to preserve, protect and worship nature: in the same manner, as Indigenous people do. The human-nonhuman relationship in Naga and Adi folk tales and mythology has been reevaluated in Mamang Dai's and Easterine Kire's writing. Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a story of four generations interwoven with mythology and folk tale. In her narration, she tries to showcase a generation gap and its associated cultural, social, economic, and ecological differences through the ages. Through the analysis of Adi folk tales, she tries to justify the ecological wisdom of the Adi community and the eco-mystical way of living is the only solution to the ecological imbalance today's world is facing. Similar to Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) depicts the lives of the Tenyimia Naga community on a remote mountain, their attachment to the land, their rituals, beliefs, and harmonious life with the natural surrounding (Dhanya and Bhattacharyya 1-12). Their connection with the nonhuman being and nature helps them become more knowledgeable regarding their environment, which constructs their "archetypal memory" (Jung, 1919) of preserving and protecting the ecology. Janice Pariat uses Khasi mythology and folk tales in her writing to bring forth the Indigenous knowledge of "ecological sustainability" (Callicott 27-47). Her novel *Boats on Land* (2012) demonstrates a clear worldview of the Indigenous community, their close relationship with ecology, and how it has deteriorated with the influence of materialism and commercialism. It is evident in the narration that the socio-cultural roots of the Khasi community are changing over time, detaching them from their long-rooted ecological legacy.

Contemporary writers from the northeast region of India basically focus on the long-rooted ecological legacy of the Indigenous community in their narration to revive the lost glory of the mentioned community in the form of myth, story, folk tales, and legends and what role these oral traditions play in the life of the Indigenous community. It is evident in their narration that North-East Indigenous folk tales largely shape the cultural identity and consciousness of the community. So, this consciousness regarding ecology spontaneously motivates the Indigenous community to protect it.

## **Conclusion**

North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales are diversified and vary from place to place. North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales and paintings depict the human-nonhuman relationship and the importance of nature in their life. Besides the human-nonhuman relationship, deep attachment with the nature also inculcates a sense of thankfulness and gratitude toward the environment, leading to eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality of the Northeast Indian Indigenous folk tales also play a pivotal role in creating eco-consciousness among the Indigenous Community. Nature, nurture and belongingness with place and environment are key contributions of Indigenous folk tales among the community. Contemporary writers revive mythology, folk tales, and legends in their narration to form a "collective memory" of the Indigenous community concerning land,



nonhuman form, and ecology. Their narration reflects a holistic view of the Indigenous community and their attitude towards nature as a whole to provide a better understanding of the present ecological imbalance due to unethical exploitation and over-used of natural resources unscientifically. At the same time, it provides a positive vibe and scientific temperament to protect and preserve the degrading ecology. Apart from this awareness of and belongingness with nature, the North-East Indigenous folk tales revives the socio-cultural history of Indigenous people of interdependencies with nature from time immemorial. Revival of Indigenous folk tales in the form of Indigenous narration revitalizes the reader's memory concerning the ecological imbalance and glorious socio-cultural legacy of the Indigenous community with the land, river, plants, animals, mountains, and the cosmology surrounded them. So, an Indigenous folk tale narrates not only the story of animals, plants, and deities but also the undercurrent of a deep-rooted environmental consciousness which unconsciously helps the Indigenous community to save the environment from degradation. This study shows that the cultural identity of the Indigenous community in the North-Eastern part of India, in the form of folk literature, tremendously assists the community in centralized the ecology and nonhuman beings into their consciousness, which plays a major role in constructing the deep ecology in the consciousness of the community which drive them in preserving and protecting the ecology to sustain their cultural identity and legacy.

## References

- "Environment for Indigenous Peoples." *United Nations*. United Nations, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2023. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/environment.html>
- "Indigenous People and Nature: A Tradition of Conservation." *United Nations Environment Programme*, 2017.
- A.P, Dhanya, and Sudakshina Bhattacharya. "The Praxis of the Wedded Mystic: A Divergent Reading of Easterine Kire's Novel When the River Sleeps." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 11.3 (2019). Print.
- Ahi, Berat, Dilara Yaya, and Sibel Ozsoy. "The Concept of Environment in Folktales from Different Cultures: Analysis of Content and Visuals." *International Electronic Journal of Environmental Education* 4.1 (2014): 1-17. Print. doi: 10.18497/iejee-green.64123
- Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for my head: Stories*. Penguin U.K, 2009. Book.
- Bacon, J. M. "Dangerous Pipelines, Dangerous People: Colonial Ecological Violence and Media Framing of Threat in the Dakota Access Pipeline Conflict." *Environmental Sociology* 6.2 (2019): 143-153. Print. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2019.1706262>
- Boas, Franz. "Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians." *The Journal of American Folklore* 27.106 (1914): 374. Print. <https://doi.org/10.2307/534740>
- Booth, Annie L. "We Are the Land: Native American Views of Nature." *Science Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Science* (2003): 329-349. Print.



- Borgohain, Krishna, and Kumud das. "The ethnic beliefs on sacred plants and animals of different tea tribes in an around Dibrugarh district of assam, India." *applied trends in life sciences*. (2023): 1-14. Print.
- Cajete, Gregory A. "Children, Myth and Storytelling: An Indigenous Perspective." *Global Studies of Childhood* 7.2 (2017): 113–130. Print.
- Callicott, J. Baird. "Ecological Sustainability." *The International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics* (2018): 27–47. Print.
- Cariou, Warren. "Terristory: Land and Language in the Indigenous Short Story – Oral and Written." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 42.2 (2020): n. pag. Print.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent spring*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. Book.
- Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books India, 2006. Book.
- Deka, Meeta. "Folklore and Northeast Indian History." *Sociology Mind* 01.04 (2011): 173–176. Print.
- Emeneau, M. B., Verrier Elwin, and Shamrao Hivale. "Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal." *The Journal of American Folklore* 59.231 (1946): 79. Print.
- Jayashree, Narasingaram. "Ecocentric and Mythopoeic Facets in Tamsula Ao's Poem, Stone People from Lungterok." *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development*. (2017): 343-345. <http://www.ijtrd.com/papers/IJTRD12066.pdf>
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Four archetypes*. Routledge, 2014. Book.
- Kharmawphlang, Desmond. "In Search of Tigermen: the were-tiger tradition of the Khasis." *India International Centre Quarterly* 27 (2001): 160-176. [jstor.org/stable/pdf/23005708.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23005708.pdf)
- Kire, Easterine. *When the river sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014. Book.
- Madsen, Peter. "Deep Ecology." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deep-ecology>. Accessed August 27 2022.
- Maurya, P. K., et al. "An introduction to environmental degradation: Causes, consequence and mitigation." *Environmental degradation: causes and remediation strategies* 1 (2020): 01-20. doi: 10.26832/area-2020edcrs-01
- Mika, Jason Paul et al. "Indigenous Environmental Defenders in Aotearoa New Zealand: Ihumātao and Ōroua River." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18.2 (2022): 277–289. Print. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221083164>
- Naess, Arne. "The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary." *The Ethics of the Environment*. Routledge, (2017): 115-120.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, trans. and ed. David Rothenberg. New York: Cambridge University Press. (1989).
- Norgaard, Kari Marie, and James V. Fenelon. "Towards An Indigenous Environmental Sociology." *Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (2021): 477-494. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77712-8\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77712-8_23)
- Pariat, Janice. *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories*. Random House India, 2012.
- Phukan, Mitra. *The Collector's Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India with Zubaan, 2005. Print.

- Raha, Debopam. "Folk Tales of North-East India: A Tryst with Nature." *International Journal of Novel Research in Interdisciplinary Studies* 6.6 (2019): 1-3.  
<http://www.noveltyjournals.com/>
- Ramakrishnan, P. S. *The Cultural Cradle of Biodiversity*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 2008. Print.
- Richmond, L., Middleton, B.R., Gilmer, R. *et al.* Indigenous Studies Speaks to Environmental Management. *Environmental Management* 52, (2013):1041-1045.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-013-0173-y>
- Rothenberg, D. "Deep Ecology." *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (2012): 738-744. Print.  
doi:10.1016/B978-0-12-373932-2.00352-5
- Saifullah, Md. Khaled, Muhammad Mehedi Masud, and Fatimah Binti Kari. "Vulnerability Context and Well-Being Factors of Indigenous Community Development: A Study of Peninsular Malaysia." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17.1 (2021): 94-105. Print.
- Snider, Anthony *et al.* "Comparing Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors between an Indigenous and a Non-Indigenous Sample from New Zealand and the United States of America." *Environmental Management and Sustainable Development* 10.1 (2020): 1-23. Print.  
doi:10.5296/emsd.v10i1.17820
- Tulika Dey - *pedagogy of learning*. n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2023.
- Tyagi, Swati; Garg, Neelam; & Paudel, Rajan. "Environmental Degradation: Cause and Consequences," *Russian Federation European Researcher*, 81.8-2, (2014):1491-1498. Pdf.
- United Nations Environment Programme. *Indigenous People and Nature: A Tradition of Conservation*, 2017.

### Author Bio -

<sup>1</sup>Sanarul Hoque (Corresponding author) is a Research Scholar of English in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Management at the Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, India. His areas of interest include Indigenous literature, Postcolonial World Literature, and Environmental Literature.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Punyashree Panda is an Associate Professor of English at IIT Bhubaneswar. Dr. Panda comes with 18 years of teaching and research experience. She has more than thirty national and international research papers and book publications to her credit. She won the prestigious WISC Summer Residential Fellowship in 2014, the first and only Indian to have won it so far. The same year, she also won the IWL fellowship offered by Harvard University, USA. In the last 15 years, Dr. Panda has trained both Academia and Industry personnel in India and abroad. Her current areas of interest include Postcolonial World Literature, Cross-Cultural Communication, Eco-fiction, and Memory Studies. Panda's in-depth article titled "Indigenous Humour in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle: An Ecocritical Perspective*", published by Penn State University Press, appeared in *Studies in American Humor* in 2020.



## Brueghel, Van Gogh, and Chirico: Inter-Animation of Painting and Writing in Some Ekphrastic Poems

Sadia Binte Kausar

Lecturer in English, National Institute of Textile Engineering & Research (NITER)

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Mail id: sbkausar@niter.edu.bd | Orcid- [0009-0003-4802-9259](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4802-9259)

### Abstract

This article examines a critical reading of some selected ekphrastic poems to underscore the ways an ekphrastic poem re-presents or subverts the meaning of the original work of art and offers new ways of consumption. Ekphrasis, in its purest form, is the vivid verbal or literary description or reconstruction of a visual piece of art, real or imaginary. An ekphrastic poem is an amalgam of the poet's intellectual and emotional responses to the art and oftentimes varies in meanings and expressions from the work it took inspiration from, that is, an ekphrastic poem may add to, and sometimes even deconstruct or subvert the meanings of the art. An ekphrastic poem not only appears as an independent form of art but also mobilizes the readers. This article unfolds in two ways. It offers a comparative reading of some select ekphrastic poems that are premised on the same work of art. It investigates three sets of poems that re-imagine Pieter Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. This article also addresses some poems based on Giorgio de Chirico's *Conversation among the Ruins* and demonstrates how Sylvia Plath's eponymous poem subverts the male gaze accentuated in Chirico's painting. This article contends that ekphrastic poems are not mere descriptions of the paintings, rather they stand alone as independent forms of art as a result of being outcomes of the poets' creative and emotional responses.

**Keywords:** Ekphrasis, ekphrastic poems, art, painting

### Introduction

The bards of ekphrasis have created museums of words about artworks, paintings, or sculptures. Heffernan demonstrates how ekphrastic poetry commemorates the power of a silent image, even if it somehow curbs that power within the command of language. Besides bringing a silent painting to life with words, a poet oftentimes instills or shifts the voice within a male into a female, redirecting the gaze from the masculine to the feminine, thus, re/deconstructing the painter's artwork. This paper intends to argue that the ekphrastic poems, known to verbalize a work of art, do not always literally describe them in words, but change due to the poet's intellectual or creative response. Drawing from Saussure's and Pierce's theories of Semiotics and the

gaze theory, the paper wants to uncover how the ekphrastic poems may add, re/deconstruct, or subvert the meanings and expressions from the source of their inspiration, that is, painting. This study aims to observe how the changes brought about in the perspectives or meanings in the ekphrastic re-imaginings may influence the reader. (Heffernan 1-3) Heffernan also points out:

Ekphrasis fascinates me for several reasons. First, it evokes the power of silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language, it is intensely paragonal. Second, the contest it stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space. (4-5)

Explorations about ekphrasis have concerned writers and critics throughout the ages. Horace Walpole proved literature to be an art that is comparable to painting, "As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance" (Walpole 20). Wallace Stevens (1951) focused on some common attributes of poetry and painting, "No poet can have failed to recognize how often a detail, a remark, in respect to painting, applies also to poetry" (160). On the other hand, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued that both arts are similar in the result or experience they produce, but the arts themselves differ both in the objects and in the methods of their imitation.

## Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis (ecphrasis), a rhetorical or literary exercise, sometimes defined as a sub-genre of poetry, in its cardinal form, means verbalizing or describing a visual form of art. Originating from the Greek word 'ek' and 'phrasis', meaning "out" and "speak" respectively and also from the verb, ekphrasis, meaning "to proclaim or call an inanimate object by name" (13), its history dates back to the eighth century when Homer in his eighteenth book of *The Iliad* described Achilles' shield. The word entered English language in 1715 and even when Keats' ekphrastic poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written, the word ekphrasis was not used.

Murray Kierger's essay, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokōon* Revisited", was the first and the single most influential work to articulate ekphrasis. Heffernan defines ekphrasis as "ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a visual representation" (299). Influential Western poets, ranging from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Keats to Auden, Carlos Williams, and Plath have composed ekphrastic poems of merit. It has been commonly employed in the East also, especially in the Arab-speaking world. For Kierger, "ekphrasis is a general principle of poetics, asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity" (45). The poet here reads the painting as a text rather than a static object. Pictorialism and iconicity are the two aspects that contrast literature and art. Over the years, theorists have been aware of the importance of



Ekphrasis and its journey. Mitchell Foucault puts forward the idea of the relation between a visual and a verbal such as “imagination and metaphor bridging the gap” between the two art mediums. (Foucault 156)

Michel Foucault shifts his description from ekphrasis to the relation of language and painting, on the painting *Las Maninas* (1656), and Foucault opines, “But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation [...] Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms” (10). The earliest work of ekphrasis is in the tenth book of *The Iliad* where Homer describes Achilles’ shield made by Hephaestus. This sort of ekphrasis is the verbalization of an imaginary work of art, but surely Homer’s verbal depiction surpasses even the most real of artworks. Another early instance of ekphrasis is found in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where the carvings on the temple in Carthage are narrated from the remnants of the Trojan War. Dante’s *Purgatory* also contains.

Ekphrastic description in Canto X, where the sculptures curved out of marble at the side of the Purgatory Mountain. Ekphrasis is found in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* where tapestries which explore Jove’s amorous exploits are narrated. During the era of the Italian Renaissance, William Blake wrote a few ekphrastic poems, namely, “The Tiger”, “The Clod and the Pebble” and “Hole Thursday”. In the second half of the eighteenth century, poets such as John Ruskin and Walter Pater wrote ekphrastic poems about older arts. After the time of Milton, shorter ekphrastic poems were composed. Among the popular are P.B Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in Florentine Gallery”, Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” 1915 and Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.”

Since the twentieth century, ekphrastic poems on imaginary arts have become lesser in quantity. Works on sculptures and paintings began to flourish. Examples are W.C Williams “Pictures from Breughel”, Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo”, John Berryman’s “Hunters in the Snow”, W.H Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles”, and many more. The modern ekphrastic poems are noticed to introduce innovative ideas with some presenting new perspectives and meanings if compared to the original paintings they are produced from. There is a “mutual convertibility” of art and literature which is based upon the negotiation between two different sign systems- Peirce’s sign, i.e., icon, painting communicates through icons, i.e., a sign that physically resembles what it stands for.

### **Ekphrastic manifestations of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus***

The ekphrastic manifestations of the paintings, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* which are composed by Auden, Carlos and Hamburger, and *The Starry Night*’s ekphrastic adaptations, by Anne Sexton and W.D Snodgrass are closely analyzed and compared with their respective paintings from which they are derived, following two politics, as to how they are represented by the poets and how they affect consumption.

'Museum des Beaux Arts,' or 'Museum of Fine Arts,' is an ekphrastic response to Peter Breughel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by W.H. Auden, which he wrote in 1938 while living in Brussels, Belgium. Taking the imagery from Breughel's painting, Auden focuses more on the philosophical aspect of human life and not focus on Icarus's fall as of the title of the painting. With this, one gets the idea that Auden intends to add and make changes to his poem, even though his is an ekphrastic poem. Auden adds more symbols, more subject matter and figures in the poem that do not exist in Peter Breughel's painting.

People in his poem are walking around leisurely. The elderly people are waiting for a miraculous birth and the children are skating gayly. Daily or even minor activities are mentioned, such as, "Someone is eating", or "opening a window". When Icarus' white legs drown in the sea, in some unnoticed corner of the landscape- dogs are on with their doggy life, the torturer's horse stands outside the house that scratches its behind and the animals on the street are seen to mind their businesses. These imageries or icons are not present in Breughel's painting. While some dreadful martyrdom was taking place in the poem, neither there is any seriousness, nor does any of the figures in the poem seem to be aware of any trouble happening nearby. There is a ploughman, and a woman seaming. Auden says that the ploughman "may have heard the splash / the forsaken cry" (Auden 4-5). This means that the ploughman is so immersed in his work that he may not care about anything else happening around him. These icons and images symbolize the mundanity of human life. Auden juxtaposes this mundanity of the lives around them with Icarus' unnoticed tragedy. Life goes on while a miraculous birth occurs, but nobody is concerned about Icarus' forsaken cry. The ship carries on its journey. Being composed in free verse without any care for rhythm, the figures in the poem also show no concern for Icarus' death.

William Carlos' poem, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1960), is one of the most famed poems from his book entitled *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (1962). It is yet another ekphrastic response to Breughel's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Unlike Auden, Carlos names his poem with the same name as of the painting, but this time he focuses more on the landscape of the painting, since the landscape is vaster and more focused than Icarus' death. He focuses on human indifference like Auden did. William establishes through the imagery of the painting that the achievements of humans are meaningless compared to the great fortunes of nature and very often the most brilliant or tragic incidents are overlooked. Just like Auden, Carlos describes the daily activities of the people. He mentions that it was spring when Icarus fell. The shepherd is in the fields along with his animals. But he does not notice or even want to notice Icarus' cry beside him in the ocean in a way as if Icarus' death was not a serious matter at all. The melting of Icarus' wings and his subsequent drowning is insignificant and unnoticed. Off the coast, Icarus falls into the ocean of which only a splash occurs. In Breughel's painting, there is a farmer. The poem continues without any punctuation or stops. In response to painting, Carlos uses subtle language and structure in the poem. William's presentation of landscape to the nomenclature of his poem adding it to the



painting's name *The Fall of Icarus*. This aids in conveying the message that the landscape and the surroundings are more or equally important than the fall of Icarus. The readers are bound to understand the juxtaposition of the painful irony of death and the mundanity of human lives. Ekphrasis in Auden's painting is used to convey poetic ideas about human suffering, while Carlos depicts what Breughel mentions in his painting. The two ekphrastic adaptations also differ from each other despite being the adaptations of the same paintings.

Another ekphrastic poem of Breughel's painting is Michael Hamburger's "Lines on Breghuel's Icarus", which has a much different reaction than Auden's and Williams'. Being opposed to William Carlos and Auden who give little to no concern to Icarus' death, Hamburger invests more importance in Icarus' drowning by calling him an angel: "Too late. The worst has happened: lost to man, / The angel, Icarus, forever failed" (Auden 13-14). In Hamburger's poem, amidst the daily activities of people, Icarus' waxen wings melted, and the angel fell off into the ocean, unnoticed by everyone. Hamburger reckons that it is the worst that happens to the man. If Breughel's painting had not been named after Icarus, one would not find his feet drowning in water. The figures present in the scenery also did not notice his death. Hamburger did not move his focus from Icarus and so named his poem after Icarus.

Hamburger portrays certain figures and icons in the poem to emphasise the insignificance of Icarus' death. The ploughman in the poem is the same as in the painting, but he adds a fisherman in the poem who is dreaming of fish. The sailor who might be inside the ship in the painting is feverish with memories of girls forsaken. Everyone is entangled in his work. The sailor does not stop his journey to look around. The fisherman whom people assume to look around and care for his surroundings, also does not care. He dreams of discoveries. The animals that Hamburger adds up in the scenario are either grazing in the fields or are into a sheepish present. They only see the greens, yellow, browns. There is also an eagle in the poem that gapes uncertainly. None of these icons are present in Breughel's painting. Hamburger brings additional symbols to emphasize the indifference of both humans and nature. Unlike Auden and Carlos, who portray Icarus as a victim of everyone's indifference, Hamburger implies that Icarus has rightfully faced his demise for not obeying his father's command. Hamburger also mentions that by disobeying Daedalus' warning, Icarus' demise is just as he scorned the ordering planet when he fell into the ocean. The poet wants to express to the readers his perception of the myth of Icarus, as well as complement Breughel's painting. Icarus is hardly conceivable while he is facing his demise.

Poets are found to foreground a certain theme or aspect of the painting to imply and emphasize their messages and ideas. The sinking feet of Icarus bring forth different responses in different poets- for Auden and Williams they are as unnoticeable as daily chores, while for Hamburger, it symbolizes the demise of an angel that scorns the earth. Three of the poets, Auden, Carlos, and Williams do not simply portray or describe Breughel's painting but have added certain themes and symbols.

## Ekphrastic Representation in Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*

The article discusses how the change or additions in the ekphrastic renditions of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1962) affect consumption and how the reader re-negotiates a work's meaning. *The Starry Night* is Anne Sexton's ekphrastic adaptation of Gogh's *The Starry Night*. Sexton's *The Starry Night* is an impassioned spiritual reaction to beauty and an emotional yearning for her own demolition. Sexton and Gogh's souls are much alike, tormented and wounded as they were until they committed suicide, so do their poetic and artistic oeuvres go hand in hand. Sexton views the world through Gogh's eyes, his longing is hers, and his woes are also hers. Eventually, his suicide becomes her suicide. Sexton who is known as a psychologically troubled poet, is inspired by the painting of someone as tortured and wounded as Gogh. This is why Sexton chooses to write *The Starry Night* and taking the overwhelming night landscape, pours her heart out,

Oh, starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die. (26-27)

The poem evokes even stronger emotions in the reader as one unites with Sexton's point of view, her tortured soul. The poem is rich in imagery just as Gogh's painting is filled with natural elements in a night landscape. The meaning and significance of an artwork are never fixed and are often prone to the mobilization of the reader. The readers are free to interpret the meaning of the poem and this evokes several emotions in the reader until the end when Sexton writes that he wants to die. She idolizes the night sky which evokes a certain kind of sadness and mystery in the audience. The stars are bright and the night sky is as dark as it can be. The painting contains a cypress tree swirling that stands in the middle corner of the painting which Sexton personifies as a black-haired tree that swirls up like a drowned woman. The town is silent in the poem, as the night landscape in the painting is dark and quiet too. The large cypress tree in the middle of the painting foregrounds the rest of the imagery.

Van Gogh's brush strokes appear like a black-haired tree in the hot sky. Sexton engages in several symbols and figurative language to express her emotions and ideas about the night landscape. The movements in the sky appear to be serpents to her. The night is boiling with hot stars which might evoke in the readers as if the night has reached its peak with eleven stars. The eleven stars are overwhelming, and she expresses her desire to die as a 'rushing beast' of the night as if she has reached the ultimate spiritual transcendence she dreamt of. The moon bulges in the sky as if it were tied by orange irons and as if it is giving birth to children from its eye. The moon is like a god for her. She wishes to be swallowed up by the great dragon and get herself consumed by the madness and whirling colours of the night. She imagines as if an unseen serpent devours up the stars in the night sky. The poet is restless to embrace death silently and plunge into eternal peace, freedom from her pain. The readers are mesmerized by Sexton's use of symbols and are automatically drawn into the emotional intensity in her poem.



These imagery and icons are not present in the original painting. Sexton adds up these certain symbols to deepen the emotions that she wants her readers to be aware of. The reader becomes one with her feelings and views the painting from her point of view. The poem evokes fresh ideas and responses from the painting that they were previously unaware of. The reader is thus affected by the point of view of the poet. Sexton never makes it clear if it is Van Gogh speaking through the speaker in the painting, or if it is her own tortured soul trying to reach her readers. The poem is an example of how the emotions and experiences of an artist and poet unite, also uniting art and literature in the process.

### Ekphrastic Projection in Snodgrass' "Van Gogh: The Starry Night"

W. D. Snodgrass' ekphrastic poem, "Van Gogh: The Starry Night" contains even more minute observations and deeper themes than Gogh's painting, *The Starry Night*. Even though an artwork has no fixed meaning, Snodgrass takes the readers to a new dimension that the painting might not have taken its viewers. To Snodgrass, the little town that stands calm in Van Gogh's masterpiece is old as a memory. "Old Dutch town" in the poem is as calm as Van Gogh's clear night sky filled with luminous stars. For Snodgrass, the town speaks to the readers itself, as if it were some lighthouses showing the way in the darkness:

How could I possibly be in any way of any  
Use to anyone? I am good at something! (Snodgrass 29-30)

The night sky in Van Gogh's painting is luminous with bright stars and the yellow moon and the town with tiny houses are as calm as the stars as if it were the aftermath of a wild storm or disaster. One may get the same effect from Snodgrass' poem. The painting has been presented in his poem, narrating its story of standing still after a hurricane with its dead center swept above the town.

The town remains standing after an imaginary calamity has taken away its charm. Snodgrass describes every minute detail of the town in van Gogh's painting like no one has ever done before. The tiny houses are grey cottages that lie row on row. He mentions this town to be an old Dutch town with browning red houses and bright stoops, the doors are white or yellow. The angled roofs lay like an old memory. Snodgrass may have wanted to express that the town was once a centre of all charm and vigour. But now it only remains like a memory. He adds details of the natural beauty of the town where flowers are blossoming, the fruits are ripe, the father's sermon and the nightingale had not been heard yet. Further details include slate roofs ascending and stone stairs descending step by step.

Snodgrass at this point, reveals that this village is now a dead-centre, hurricane's eye, where the chapel is small and perhaps insignificant as a child's toy. The Father is also described as narrow-minded, icy cold, like iron. The clouds silently spiral up into

the sky keen as mother's needle, breaking the gloominess of the night-sky. There is still hope after the hurricane swept away the dead-centre of the town. The town speaks of hope, of some lighthouse showing the way amid darkness. As van Gogh's *Starry Night* is a clear night-sky illuminated with numerous bright stars, so is the town clear and calm after a hurricane takes place. The painting and the town both speak for themselves. The town speaks of hope, that it is good for something and will illuminate the paths where there is no light.

Snodgrass describes van Gogh's painting most vibrantly, contrasting van Gogh's calm night sky with his poem's calm village. The addition of certain symbols and signifiers adds new dimension to the poem, making the reader dive deeper into wider horizons of imagination. He describes the painting and reconstructs it, too. Like Gogh's swift and mesmerizing brushstrokes, Snodgrass builds his words such a way that a reader is evoked with feelings of sleepiness and heaviness spiraling into a poetic mystery. Like the impressionistic strokes of the artist, the stanza about the sky is filled with swirling and energetic words. Through the use of words and creative imagery beyond painting, Snodgrass takes his readers to another medium.

Both Sexton and Snodgrass celebrate *The Starry Night* in their own ways. The poetic response of the same painting in two poets is thus seen to be different. This ambiguity suggests a powerful ability and experience of art and beauty to not only cross the horizons of time and space but also dissolve the boundaries from one person to another. The ekphrastic poem has opened up more for the readers to ponder upon the painting and widened their perception. Art has tempered wounded souls, their pain and anguish, relieving them from their loneliness and anxieties.

### **Ekphrastic Interpretation in *Conversation among the Ruins***

Ekphrastic poems sometimes subvert or deconstruct the perspectives of their original paintings. Plath's eponymous ekphrastic poem, *Conversation Among the Ruins* will be observed in this section, if and how it subverts the perspective of Giorgio de Chirico in his painting *Conversation Among the Ruins*. The poem, in a surrealist style, depicts a destroyed and barren domestic scene with a man and a woman who are in direct conflict with each other. The position of the dominant and destructive man and the victim woman portrays the dynamic of power play in their relationship that reveals some greater themes of the painting as well as Plath's poem. The destroyed landscape shows a woman who is sitting. Only her back is seen and not her face. A man faces her, standing tall in his heroic attire. This position in the painting shows the subordinate role of the woman in comparison to her destructive partner. Plath incorporates the symbolic imagery out of the painting with some creations of her own, to dive deeper into the poem. In the painting, the man is standing tall, stalking with wild furies, who destroy the happy relationship that they once had. Their relationship was like magic, but it has been destroyed by whirlwinds by the dominating man. The woman whose face is not seen seems to have no agency or power over her male counterpart. She is wounded and her love is vulnerable. Plath compares him with the monsters of Greek tragedy, such



cruelty is Plath's depiction of the masculine. The woman is sitting vulnerably with a Grecian tunic and psyche-knot. Psyche is the wife of Eros, the god. She had to survive trials to preserve her marriage with the god. Similarly, Plath says that the woman is wounded by her love, and it is the man who is the cause of this destruction.

Although the woman in the painting is powerless, Plath re-creates her in her poem, giving her a voice to narrate and dominate her own story in the poem. She writes that the woman is a daunted witch, quitting castle when real days break. Witches in literature are usually frightening and scary characters. The poetess employs it as a symbol of feminization against the dominating man. The romantic relationship has become a persecuted witch that wants to turn away from the abundance of the castle and hide from the spotlight. In the Octet, she focuses on the man's power and remains voiceless herself. But in the Sestet, she takes the power into her own hands and turns a scary witch into a daring character.

In the painting, the woman does not have a face and does not have a voice in Plath's poem until in the Sestet. The poetess refuses to keep her the victim, and so, in the sestet, she gives the agency to speak for herself. She speaks that the man has damaged her to such an extent that she and the relationship cannot be reconciled anymore. This shift from her being powerless to having an agency in the second half of the poem reconstructs, or in a sense, subverts the original theme of the painting. Plath refuses to project victimization on the part of her female character and thus makes her speak for herself by subverting the point of view of Chirico's painting.

### Reversing the Gaze

This article attempts to demonstrate how Plath redirects the gaze in her eponymous ekphrastic poem, subverting or deconstructing Chirico's painting and how it affects the mind of the reader. Plath redirects the readers to view Chirico's painting from a new perspective by inserting agency and voice to the oppressed woman in the painting. The woman in the painting sits submissively, while in Plath's poem, she speaks about how the masculine brought destruction in their relationship,

Through the portico of my elegant house, you stalk  
With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit (Plath 1-2)

As Plath says, "through my elegant house you stalk", she exerts power by asserting the house to be hers and informs that it is the dominating man who disturbed the whole situation. Although the woman does not speak about herself in the first part of the poem but talks about the dominating man and how he destroyed their relationship single-handedly, in the sestet, she takes her power back like a daunted witch, and leaves the stormy eyes of the cruel man. The readers who expect the mute and submissive woman in the painting to be the same in the poem, are forced to view her from a new perspective. Her face is not seen in Chirico's painting. A small painting of hers hanging on the wall

of the fractured wall may be her portrait, or even be a mirror reflecting her face. Interestingly, the audience can view the dominant man as he stands but the submissive woman is seen through his eyes. This dynamic of power prevails throughout the painting. Thus, the woman is represented through the man. Her hair is also tied in a psyche-knot, symbolizing the vulnerability of psyche, the wife of Eros who fought to preserve her marriage. All these signifiers in Chirico's painting indicate the woman's powerlessness, while in Plath's poem, the perspective shifts as she speaks for herself and narrates the situation herself, instead of being a silent observer in the painting. The power-play that exists in Chirico's painting is reversed by Plath for the readers to experience a newer perspective. Chirico made the masculine play dominant in the painting, keeping the woman away from the eyes of the viewers, only to be seen through the male gaze. The painting or the reflection of her in the mirror enables the viewers to see her as she cannot in any other way. Contrarily, Plath speaks through the female in her poem. Plath intentionally reverses the gaze onto the female by turning away from the masculine. By giving voice to the voiceless, she invests new dimensions and meaning to her poetry while deviating from Chirico's painting.

Plath provides alternate ways for a reader to show Chirico's painting. By redirecting or reversing the gaze from the masculine to the oppressed feminine in the poem, Plath enables the readers to consider new perspectives that the reader did not ponder upon. The reader is free to criticize the painting from his point of view, as well as from the perspective of Plath. An artwork largely depends on a viewer's perception and point of view and the audience is free to interpret and appreciate artworks according to his or her own choice. Plath has added fresh dimensions to the painting by which the reader shifts his or her focus from the patriarchal setting to the female becoming stronger in the sestet of her poem. It redirects the male gaze from the masculine to the feminine in Chirico's painting through subverting or deconstructing the perspective or gaze of the source of inspiration, that is, the painting. Giving voice and agency to Chirico's powerless feminine, Plath changes the interpretation of the reader providing them with an alternative path of thinking.

## Conclusion

Ekphrasis categorizes itself as the rhetorical device giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object which serves as a medium that is intended to bring forth a picture before the mind's eye. Ekphrasis, according to Heffernan, is the verbal representation of a visual representation. When Davidson juxtaposes calling it a painterly poem, he brought forth a strategy elaborating that ekphrasis generates an equivalence and is not dependent on the painting. The ekphrastic manifestations are expected to show dialogism since one is animated from the other, one is enhanced by the other and hence no one stands secondary in this aspect. By analyzing the ekphrastic poems critically, it is noticed that the ekphrastic re-imaginings of Breughel, Van Gogh and Giorgio Chirico add to the existing contexts, foreground, or reject certain aspects



and also redirect the gaze of the paintings, rather than merely verbalizing their original source of inspiration, that is, the paintings. Thus, they serve as an independent form of art by providing fresher perspectives and widened new dimensions for the audience and readers. Ekphrastic poems show how the emotions and experiences of an artist and poet unite, also uniting art and literature in the process.

## References

- Auden, W. H. *Selected Poems*. Faber & Faber. 1979.
- Heffernan, James A. W. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Chicago Press, 2004.
- Mendelson, Edward, editor. *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Vintage Books 1991.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Ted Hughes, Faber & Faber, 1981.
- Williams, Carlos. *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poem*. New Direction Books, 1962.
- Baugher, Janee J. "Art to Art: Ekphrastic Poetry". *Boulevard* vol. 25, no. 1, 2009, pp. 111-114.
- Bruegel, the Elder P. (N.P) *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* [oil on canvas] Brussels: Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.
- D'Angelo, Frank J. "The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis." *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture and Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1998, pp. 439-447.
- Foucault, Michel. (1963). "Préface à la transgression." *Critique: Hommage a Georges Bataille*. 1963, pp.195-6.
- Gotthold Lessing. *Laocoon*, translated by Edith Frothingham. New York: Noonday Press, 1969.
- Hamburgher, Michael. *Collected Poems. 1941-1983*. Carcanet Press, Manchester 1984,
- Haven, Stephen, editor. *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass: Everything Human*.
- Kim, Hannah (27 May 2010). "[Vincent van Gogh's The Starry Night, now pocket-sized!](#)." MoMA. Retrieved 12 June 2015.
- Kinney, AF. *Auden, Bruegel, and 'Musée des Beaux Arts'*. 1963.
- Krieger, Murray. "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokoon* Revisited." *Perspectives on Poetry*, edited by James Calderwood and Harold Toliver, Oxford UP, 1968.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay in the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Translated by E.C. Beasley, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1853.
- Mc Couat Philip. "Bruegel's Icarus and the Perils of Flight". *Journal of Art in Society*.
- Mendelson, E. "The European Auden". *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, edited by S Smith, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 120-134.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "What Is an Image?" *New Literary History*, vol.15, no. 3, Spring 1984, pp. 503-537.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Ekphrasis and the Other." *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Nordquist, Richard. "Ekphrasis: Definition and Examples in Rhetoric." *ThoughtCo*, Apr. 5, 2023, [thoughtco.com/ekphrasis-description-term-1690585](https://www.thoughtco.com/ekphrasis-description-term-1690585).
- Panagiotidou, Maria-Eirini. *Ekphrasis: Past and Present*. In *The Poetics of Ekphrasis*. 2022, pp. 15
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination*. New York: MacMillian Publishers, 1969.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Yale Editions of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, vol. 36. Yale University Press, 1973.

## Tunde Kelani's Women: A Look at Patriarchy in Selected Nollywood Films through a Womanist's Len

Lillian Shoroye

PhD, Department of Mass Communication, Dominion University, Ibadan.

Mail Id: [loshoroye@gmail.com](mailto:loshoroye@gmail.com) | Orcid - [0009-0001-5897-1905](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5897-1905)

### Abstract

Although filmmakers in the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, have consistently depict the family setting as a reference point for x-raying the struggles and trials of individuals or a group of people within the larger society, researchers in the field have rarely concerned themselves with highlighting this connection. While conflicts in marital relationships continues to receive attention as a significant thematic preoccupation in Nollywood, analyses of these films are usually focused at identifying issues vis-à-vis the negative representations and objectification of women. This is often to the exclusion of how the films serve as commentaries and reflections on social relations in the large society. Against the foregoing background, this study examines the role of patriarchy in the ordeal of two protagonists in the oeuvre of Nigerian filmmaker, Tunde Kelani, namely, Ngozi in *Thunderbolt* (2001), and Awero in *The Narrow Path* (2007). It adopts the conceptual frameworks of auteur theory and Womanism in the analyses of the film texts. Analyses reveal that the films are commentaries on gender relationships in African societies where women are victims of cultural inequities dictated by patriarchy. In addition, in line with womanist ideology, they emphasize the significance of cooperation between both sexes for the peaceful coexistence and development of any community.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, auteur theory, Womanism, Tunde Kelani, Nollywood

### 1. Introduction: Patriarchy, the African Woman and Nollywood films

Patriarchy has been variously defined by scholars to reflect a situation where male members of a family or community dictate the rules that govern the lives of the female members of that community, usually with bias that protect male interests and self-expression while denying or suppressing that of women. Discrimination and subjugation of women is a worldwide phenomenon that is as old as the human society. It is an existential fact that women face a lot of suppression especially in developing countries in Africa and Asia. In many African societies, the subordination of women is ingrained in traditions and cultural practices that employ double standards to impose restrictions on them, thereby hindering women from reaching their full potentials to be equal contributors to the development and advancement of their societies. Patriarchy is rooted in religions, cultural practises, and traditions that favour men at the expense of women. Rich notes that within patriarchy, men "by



force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor” determine women roles in the society (41).

In her definition of patriarchy, Bhasin avers, “Patriarchy refers to male domination, to power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (3). The subordination of women occur both in private and public spheres, thus it is observable both in family settings and in the larger society. In private, females are subordinate to their fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles and other male members of their family. In public, they experience discrimination in terms of accesses to sources of production and employment opportunities. Although patriarchy has often been justified by arguments of biological determinism, Walby explicates patriarchy “as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (20). Walby proceeds to identify what she describes as the six structures of patriarchy, namely: “The patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institution” (*ibid*).

The definitions put forward by Rich, Bhasin, and Walby are significant. Patriarchy is about the relationship between men and women. It also manifests in the various relationship structures in different spheres of life as suggested by Walby. The reference to “male violence” is also instructive here; acts of rape and domestic violence are the results of a socialization system that make men think they are superior to women to the point of justifying subjugation of women with force. Bell Hook foregrounds this sexual violence in her definition of patriarchy as “the institutionalized structure of male dominance,” which “encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion toward others, women and children” (148). Understandably, patriarchy is considered “the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development” (Sultana 1).

In many African communities, discrimination against the women manifests in regards to property inheritance, the privileging of boy-child education over girls, forced and underage marriages, and household chores. Men make the rules while women comply. The suppression of women’s sexuality through cultural practises detrimental to their lives such as female genital mutilation, marriage of underage girls and widowhood rites are examples of women subjugation in patriarchal societies. Nollywood, Nigeria’s burgeoning film industry, dominated by male filmmakers has been criticised for upholding and promoting a patriarchal agenda in terms of the dynamics of the portrayal of women in their films.<sup>i</sup> In their comments on patriarchal representation of women in Nollywood, Shaka and Uchendu note:

Patriarchy is a deep-rooted societal ideology almost as old as time. By mental, social, and cultural conditioning, the female is framed into two extremes of a divide. On the one hand, there is the docile, submissive, accepting, never protesting, never questioning, and quiet model of a woman. This is the dream desire of man in a patriarchal society.... This image of the Nigerian woman in video films is a fictional construct borne out of the repressed desires and imaginations of patriarchy. On the extreme left is the shrew, the tigress, the independent activist woman. This is the scheming, politicking, demanding, wayward rebel who would do anything including

kill, and use any means, including diabolical means to achieve her aims and ambition (1).

Between these two extreme framing of women, Nigerian filmmaker, Tunde Kelani, creates a balance. His films reveal a deliberate effort at redeeming the degrading, pejorative, and stereotypical images of women, on both sides of the divide. Thus, in contrast to the often despicable, immoral, and arrogant images, Kelani's depictions are realistic and affirmative. His representation asserts the agency of women as dedicated mothers committed to their children's upbringing, submissive wives committed to their marriage vows, and admirable maidens who speak up against injustice.

However, in most Nollywood films, as in reality, patriarchy persists, in spite of the fact that women have made several advancements in various spheres of life, showing they are capable of taking lead, making rules, and solving problems to the benefit of every member of their communities. Nevertheless, human society has fared better with the recognition of the abilities of women, the acceptance of their support, and contributions to the development of their communities.

## 2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study adopts auteur theory and Womanism as conceptual frameworks for discussions in this paper. Auteur theory emerged from the idea that the director of a film "functioning as an author, integrates all the elements into one composite design, much as the author of a book may integrate ideas or actual work of others into his overall composition (Cahir 86)." The central idea in *auteurism* is the conviction that it is possible to identify certain characteristics of style, and recurrent themes in the work of a particular director (Sarris 562). It recognises directorial vision and inspiration as critical components in the analysis of films. Concerning methodology in auteur analysis of films, Cahir enumerates approaches usually adopted to explore "particular patterns traceable throughout the works of one director" (255), as follows:

1. Defining the stylistic traits of one film *auteur* and tracing those traits either through his/her *oeuvre* or through one specific film of his/hers
2. Tracing a particular genre favored by one film *auteur* through several of his/her films
3. Tracing a particular theme favoured by one film *auteur* through several of his/her films
4. Tracing the influences (historical, literary, filmic, and personal), that shaped the work of one film *auteur* (Cahir, *Ibid*).

Subsequently, two films from Kelani's *oeuvre* are analysed to explore recurrent themes, and influences in his art with particular reference to his adoption of a womanist philosophy. The selected films are; *Thunderbolt/Magun* (2001) and *The Narrow Path* (2007).

Womanism is an offshoot of feminism, which focus on the African woman or the woman of color. Womanism is a term credited to African-American novelist, Alice Walker, in reaction to the inadequacy of the feminism to capture the historical antecedent and lived experience of African



women and others who do not have the privileges of white feminists (x-xii). Womanism goes where feminism stops short by addressing both racism and classism, while opposing separatism between the sexes in cognizance of men's role as an integral part of black women's lives as children, lovers, and family member. Womanism celebrates the black woman's "outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful behaviour," the agency of women and their "strength" as survivors of various forms of oppression, their "commitment to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," an ideology of non-separatism, and are 'traditionally universalist,' thus advocating inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in relation to race, class, or gender (Walker, *Ibid*). Womanism is thus interested in empowering the female while promoting equality for sexes, races and classes. A filmmaker manifests a womanist orientation when the elements of his style reveal a celebration or promotion of the principles of Womanism as enumerated by Walker. Tunde Kelani fits this description.

### 3. Tunde Kelani: A brief Biography

In the corpus of directors in Nollywood, there are few whose works stand out for technical quality, consistency, and commitment to a vision. Tunde Kelani leads this group. Kelani is recognised as Nollywood's "most respected and technically-accomplished practitioner" (Haynes 1). His vision and commitment to the production of films that can hold their own alongside his counterparts anywhere in the world sets him apart in the Nigerian movie industry. His technical style is attributed to his professional training and cultural orientation. Kelani's first professional training was as a photographer. He also spent several years as a camera operator with different Media houses including Western Nigerian Television (WNTV). He holds a diploma in the Art and Technique of Filmmaking from the London International Film School, UK. In a career, that spans over forty years, he has been involved in the production of over twenty movies as a cinematographer before venturing into private production. He has produced over twenty feature films of his own. According to Jonathan Haynes, he is the director "on whom the mantle of a film auteur fits most naturally" (113).

Kelani's films stand out as the exception in an industry that thrives on original script for feature film production. This is because his films are often adapted from Nigerian Literature in English or Yoruba. The films selected for this studies fall into this category. *Thunderbolt* is an adaptation of Adebayo Faleti's *Magun*, and *The Narrow Path* is an adaptation of Bayo Adewale's *The Virgin*. The Yoruba cultural upbringing of his childhood is his major influence and he is committed to the promotion and preservation of his cultural heritage. While culture and politics have a central place in his films, he engages several topical issues that are national as well as universal and through his narratives, he "takes controversial social issues, converts them into culturally relevant topics, and injects them into public discourse" (Giwa-Isekeiji 99).

One observable element of Kelani's style is the frequent use of women as protagonists in his films. Kelani is of the opinion that African culture is a burden to women, and one of his missions as a filmmaker is to highlight some of the injustice usually meted out on the female gender. Adeduntan attests that: "There is an unmistakable womanist bias in many of Kelani's movies" (5) and viewers encounter realistic, resolute, and admirable women who come out stronger in spite of the suffering

and the emotional anguish of their experience. Usually, the women experience betrayal by the men in their lives, whether as husbands, trusted friend, or fiancé. Kelani therefore compels viewers to look at the other side of a woman's life, as he highlights the atrocities of men against women in patriarchal societies.

Izgarjan and Markov observe that "at the center of Womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment" (304). In their diverse roles as mothers, wives and maidens, Kelani portrays their experiences and calls certain aspects of the African culture to question as he highlights the inequity against women. He agrees that African culture is a burden on women, and seeks to be part of mitigating this in many of his films (Yeku n. p.). His women protagonists manifest the characteristics traits of Walker's womanist; they are 'wilful,' 'audacious,' and 'courageous.' Ngozi acts against folk wisdom and marries outside her ethnic group in *Thunderbolt*. Awero, the protagonist of *The Narrow Path*, find her voice and is audacious to point out the incongruity of a tradition that punishes a rape victim while the culprit goes scot-free. As Busia posits, these women are bright, articulate, and face the dilemmas of our day, whether the legacies of ancient customs or the consequences of contemporary social forces" (113).

#### 4. Discussion: Patriarchy and the Travails of African Women through a Womanist Lens

*Thunderbolt* (2001) focuses on the marriage relationship between Ngozi, an Igbo woman, and her husband, Yinka, a Yoruba man. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society and distrust among ethnic groups is commonplace. Every marriage relationship has its share of conflict. Marital conflict, due to difference in ethic, national or racial background although common, is surmountable. However, it requires compromise from both parties otherwise; the couple have to go their separate ways.

Ngozi, the protagonist of *Thunderbolt*, is a wilful, beautiful, educated, faithfully wife and mother, who go ahead to marry a man she loves even though they are of different ethnic backgrounds, against warnings that such a marriage is bound to fail because of ethnic difference. She is a Youth Corper<sup>ii</sup> and her place of primary assignment is in a secondary school in a village. She leaves for the village every Monday and returns to her home at weekends. When her husband, Yinka, express concerns about insinuations of infidelity on her part, she reminds him that he married her as a virgin thus suggesting that if she was not promiscuous before getting married; he has no reason to doubt her faithfulness to their marriage vows. However, Yinka is obstinate; his action makes Ngozi recall the warning of a fellow Igbo Youth Corper, and admirer who predicts her marriage to a Yoruba man will not work because of ethnic differences. At this point in her flashback, Ngozi cries out, "Oh God, it must work, please make it work."

Days later, Ngozi encounters a strange old man in the market who warns her that her life is in danger. Ngozi's landlady convinces her to consult an herbalist to unravel the mysterious message. This leads to the revelation that *magun*<sup>iii</sup> has been placed on her. Ultimately, the purpose of *magun* is for any man that has intercourse with such a woman to die minutes later while the woman becomes the subject of societal stigmatization as an adulteress. She undergoes treatment but the last stage

requires her to have sexual intercourse to ensure she is completely free. Yinka, her husband, is informed of her predicament but refuses her intimacy and confesses to being responsible. To disabuse the impression that his behaviour is characteristic of his tribesmen, Veepee's (the Vice principal of the secondary school in which Ngozi teaches), declares, "An evil man gives a bad name to his race, even when that race contains a host of angels, but a race is a race; a man – a man" (Murphy n. p.). It is remarkable that besides Veepee' upbraiding of Yinka, walks away without being accused of endangering Ngozi's life, neither is he compelled to right his wrong thus confirming the acceptability of his action in cultures where patriarchy holds sway.

It takes the courage and consent of an admirer, another Yoruba man, Dimeji, a medical doctor with a scientific interested in testing the authenticity of the reality of *magun*, to rid Ngozi of the spell finally. Dimeji agrees to have sexual intercourse with Ngozi but insists it has to take place in the hospital where his medical colleagues will be at hand to take action to forestall any casualty. He almost lost his life in the process but for the prompt action of the herbalists and his colleagues. After mating with Ngozi, as he got up from the bed, he staggers and starts vomiting blood. It takes the combined effort of the herbalists and the medical doctors to save Dimeji's life. While the herbalists' utter incantations and apply a substance on his forehead, his colleague quickly get him to lie on a bed and place him on drip.

Through *Thunderbolt*, Kelani interrogates the distrust between two ethnic groups, using the inter-ethnic marriage between Yinka and Ngozi as a point of departure on one hand, and on the other, highlighting one of the evils of patriarchy where husbands can treat their wives as possessions through Ngozi's ordeal. He shows that the cause of conflict is not their different ethnicity but rather the betrayal of one of the partners, in this case, the husband. More specifically, he calls to question the inequity of the cultural practise of placing *magun* on women on suspicions of infidelity and examines the place of traditional medicine in juxtaposition to orthodox medicine. He also highlights the importance of cooperation between men and woman in the building of an equitable society.

In addition, the collaborative efforts of the herbalists and his fellow doctors to save Dimeji's life through traditional medicine and orthodox method is Kelani's way of suggesting that both methods are not mutually exclusive. Again, the principal of non-separatism between women and men is foregrounded here. It took the enlistment of the assistance of both men and women for Ngozi to be finally free. First, her landlady enlists the assistance of the Veepee, and gets her father to convince her of the grave danger of *magun*. The herbalists' team also includes a woman because the initial one consulted admits he could not do it alone. This is Kelani's way of making viewers realise that the well-being of a society requires the cooperation of both men and women. In the closing scene, Dimeji tells Ngozi, "You might think that all Yoruba men are wicked." To which she replies, "There are only good and bad people. Those are the two tribes." This statement is an affirmation of the womanist philosophy of universalism and non-exclusiveness in terms of race, gender, and class.

*Thunderbolt* questions the injustice of a cultural practice where both the innocent and guilty are equally vulnerable. One can only imagine the inherent evil of this practise considering how some men could take advantage of this practice to commit cold-blooded murder for selfish reasons without anyone having the slightest notion that the death of their spouses are deliberately executed acts. The



possibility is more appalling when we consider the fact that any person could place *magun* on a woman even when he is not her husband. *Thunderbolt* therefore uses Ngozi's ordeal to highlight the injustice of this practices on women who are innocent like her. Ironically, adultery which is the reason *magun* is placed on Ngozi is what saves her life in the end. The resolution of the film is a critique of the incongruity of the cultural practise and its limits. As Olusegun Soetan notes:

The uniqueness about Kelani's projection of Nigerian cultures stems from his critiquing the obsolete and outdated cultural practices on one hand, and the elevation of useful cultural observation, that are coterminous with contemporary innovations and post-colonial modernity on the other hand. Essentially, Kelani condemns cultural practices that are both unpalatable and appalling, especially cultural practices that demonize and commodify women in rapidly transforming postcolonial societies. In *Narrow Path*, Kelani...lays bare the agony and the pain certain cultural practices inflict on individual and groups of people, especially women, in Nigeria (11).

*The Narrow Path* is the second film in our selection. Here also Kelani interrogates another cultural practice detrimental to the psychological well-being of women. In *The Narrow Path*, Awero, a young woman from Orita village, makes a choice between three suitors, Odejinmi, a clumsy hunter, Lapade, a gold merchant, and Dauda, a childhood friend and irresponsible city dweller. She decides on Odejinmi. However, weeks before their marriage ceremony, Dauda rapes her. Awero is traumatized because of the shame that awaits her on her wedding night when her husband is expected to show the wedding guest evidence of her chastity with a blood stained white handkerchief. The discovery on the wedding night that she is not a virgin leads to intercommunity conflict. Odejinmi, her husband, feels cheated and accuses her parent of giving him 'a broken pot' as bride. The punishment for a bride who is not a virgin on her wedding night is either to name the man who deflowered her and marry him, or dance naked around the village. Awero refuses to name her violator and choses to dance naked because of the incongruity of the punishment.

Awero's ordeal points a searchlight on rape, a global issue brought to social consciousness through the social media #MeToo movement (Khomami n.p.). Mary Daly and Susan Brownmiller argue that 'rape' is a metaphor for patriarchal aggression towards women. While Daly posits that patriarchy is "a kind of gang rape" of women's minds and bodies by cultural value systems imposed by men (9), Brownmiller explicates rape not as "a societal problem" that arises from a "distorted masculine philosophy of aggression" (450). Awero's experience justifies both assertions.

*The Narrow Path*, therefore, interrogates the impropriety and iniquity of the cultural practise of victimizing the victim. It dramatizes society's unsympathetic stance towards rape victims, and the stigmatization of rape victims, which is often the reason for their silence until discovery. Victim shaming has emboldened many rapists who are aware that most victims would rather hide the fact of their violation than report the incident because they are often blamed for their misfortune. In this regard, families, churches, and communities, including law enforcement agencies share a part in the blame therefore justifying Brownmiller's assertion. A classic example of how society connives against victims is the experience of impoverished women in the Central American country, El Salvador,

where rape victims are sentenced to jail for miscarriage of pregnancies or stillbirths resulting from rape (Brice-Saddler n. p.). Moreover, the overwhelming response to the #MeToo movement is a further justification of Brownmiller's stance on society's culpability, because movement gave people a sense of the magnitude of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault as a societal problem.

In Awero's case, there is no interrogation to find out if she lost her virginity wilfully or forcefully. There is no pronouncement of possible punishment for the culprit while shame awaits the victim. Awero dilemma of either naming her rapist and be 'gifted' to him as a wife or dance naked around the village shows the injustice of the cultural practice. Worst still, the rapist has a choice to accept or reject his victim as wife. Awero, who before her misfortune could be said to be docile, suddenly finds her voice, and speaks up against the injustice of the punishment mete out against women. Her refusal to name the culprit is not to protect him but rather to highlight the injustice mete out to a victim. Patriarchy in the disguise of cultural tradition does not request the name of the culprit to punish him, but rather to dehumanise his victim further. Rare in deed is the rape victim who willingly agrees to be wife to her assaulter. At that point, where Awero speaks out, she transits from victim to agent, a woman wronged, who refuses to be silence about her predicament but forces custodians of such a tradition to re-examine their stand and by so doing, she challenges the status-quo. Through her stance, therefore, she questions the incongruity of a tradition that make a woman a double victim of a misfortune with no punishment for her assaulter. She points out the faulty logic of this punishment, and the stigma that comes with it either way, when she says to her mother 'If I name the man and he refuses to marry me, what then? I will rather dance naked, after all am I not already naked in the eyes of the community?'

Cannon notes that Walker's Womanism is a belief that emphasises the moral agency of the female "challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion (23). This is what Kelani does with this movie through his protagonist, Awero. Furthermore, this narrative disrupts "the cultural rhetoric associated with women honor" (Soetan 11), and Kelani uses it to query the cultural practise that gloss over the immoral acts of men while placing a heavy sanction on women for seemingly breaking rules through no fault of theirs.

Meanwhile, Odejinmi, Awero's husband, sees her refusal to name the culprit as a slight on his manhood and his village. His rival, Lapade, also makes jest of him for ending up with 'a broken pot' as wife. Odejinmi, incensed by the whole incident, stirs the men of Aku, his village, to go to war against the men of Orita his bride's village, to avenge his bruised ego. The action of the men almost culminates in the loss of lives and properties as they don their battle garbs and arm themselves with guns and machetes while chanting war songs and burning some building. Awero, supported by some women, steps between the warring men and pleads that no blood be shed on her behalf. Her intervention is instrumental to averting the massacre that would have ensued. Her action dramatizes the pacifist trait of a womanist outlined by Walker as a commitment to the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). Commenting on Kelani's womanist stance in the film, Adeduntan avers:

Kelani's womanist orientation is reflected in, for example, the repair of the tragic denouement in [The] *Narrow Path* . . . . Although a war ensues and a community is destroyed in the novel, the movie adaptation preempts that final violence of cleansing through the intervention of women. The gèlèdè<sup>iv</sup> performance in the final scene of [The] *Narrow Path* gives precision to that pacifist achievement as a womanist triumph (6).

*The Narrow Path*, just like *Thunderbolt*, is a symbolic critique of patriarchy. It highlights how patriarchy stands behind the veil of culture to subjugate and objectify women's bodies. The film also "projects insights for rescuing the agency of women in a male-dominated society" (Soetan 12). Through the protagonists of both films, Kelani touches on the agency of women as the voice of reason. Ngozi does not condemn Yinka's tribe for his betrayal but choose to hold him singularly responsible for his action. Similarly, Awero and the women were able to avert the devastation of war on their communities through appeasement. Kelani therefore presents women as change-agents and peacemakers, whereas the men are egoistic, peevish, and reactionary. Here also he emphasized women's role as indispensable to the well-being, and progress of any society.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing analyses, Kelani employs film as his medium to interrogate cultural inequities and challenges social conventions. Women are at the receiving end of abuse, both physical and psychological, for lack of political and economic powers in patriarchal societies. In most African societies, culture and traditions interplay to dictate the roles women play as portrayed in the selected films. Moreover, Kelani celebrates the fortitude of women. Thus, he belongs in the category of African filmmakers of whom Dovey's assertion is a fitting conclusion for this study:

African male filmmakers have long engaged in stringent critiques and censures of patriarchy by parodying men and 'masculine' antics in their films . . . . In this sense, they would seem to have worked in concert with African male writers, who have tended to (self-critically) represent men – across generations, social and ethnic and class groups, and races – as problematically mired in destructive cycles of violence, often initiated through the impotence occasioned by colonial violence, but also integrated into contemporary cultures in Africa (20-21).

*Thunderbolt* explores the mistrust among various tribes in Nigeria and advocates universalism rather than tribalism or ethnocentrism. In addition, it interrogates the conflict between modern medical practises and African orthodox medicine, and advocates collaboration. *The Narrow Path* points a searchlight on rape, a universal problem, and highlights victim shaming or stigmatization as a reflection of sexual politics of our society.

Kelani's overall message in the selected films is that while patriarchy discriminates and victimizes the female gender, Womanism promotes inclusiveness and cooperation between the sexes, ethnic groups, and communities. It sees the injustice against women as an injustice against humanity. Womanism is therefore interested in integration rather than segregation. The acceptance of people



from different ethnic backgrounds is necessary for peaceful coexistence in society. Men and women must also cooperate to work for a progressive society as each has a contribution to make for the development of the society.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Chinyere Stella Okunna, "Portrayal of Women in Nigerian Home Video Films: Empowerment or Subjugation?" (*Africa Media Review* 1996, 10.3: 21-36); Aje-Ori Agbese, "Setting The Agenda For Women's Liberation And Empowerment In Nigeria Through Movies: An Analysis Of *Women's Cot*, *Women In Power* and *The Bank Manage*" (*SMC: Journal of Cultural and Media Studies*, 2013, 2.1: 1-29); and Adesina Lukuman Azeez, "Audience Perception of the Reality in the Representations of Women in Nigerian films." (*Journal of African Cinemas*, 2013, 5. 2 (149-166).

<sup>ii</sup> A Youth Corper is a member of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) usually composed of graduates from Nigerian Tertiary institutions who are below the age of 30 years at their graduation. Graduates are required to spend a year in service of the nation. Corpers are usually deployed to regions different from their ethnic origin as their place of primary assignment.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Olusegun Soetan, "*Magun* is a sexually activated affliction that is often put on a promiscuous woman. It can be remotely placed on any woman by making her to cross over any charmed material that contains the *magun* formulae. There are different types of *magun* in Yoruba land but the common type is the one exhibited by doctor Oladimeji in the *Thunderbolt* film." See "The Hearthstone: Language, Culture, and Politics in the Film of Tunde Kelani, (*Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Science Journal*, 2018, Vol. 8, No. 2) 13. 1-26.

<sup>iv</sup> Gélèdédé is a Yoruba female masquerade in ritual performance meant to celebrate and pacify mother nature as a force of reproduction, which is exemplified in women.

## References:

- Adeduntan, Ayo. "Yoruba Imaginary in the Eco-cinema of Tunde Kelani." *Green Letters* doi: 10.1080/14688417.2028.1531724. 2018.
- Bhasin, Kamla. *What is Patriarchy?* New Delhi: Woman Unlimited, 2006. Print.
- Brice-Saddler, Michael. "She was raped, had a stillbirth, and almost died: Then she was charged with the murder of her foetus." *The Washington Post*. August 2019. Web. 8, Jan. 2020.  
<[www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/20/salvadoran-woman-was-charged-death-her-stillborn-baby-judge-acquitted-her](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/20/salvadoran-woman-was-charged-death-her-stillborn-baby-judge-acquitted-her)>.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975. Print.
- BUSIA, ABENA. "WOMEN AND THE DYNAMICS OF REPRESENTATION: OF COOKING, CARS AND GENDERED CULTURE." *FEMINIST AFRICA*, 16 (2012): 98 -117.
- Cahir, Linda Constanzo. *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers. 2006. Print.
- Cannon, Katie. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press. 1988. Print.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon. 1973. Print.

- Dannies, Katie. "Turkey's 'marry your rapist' bill is part of a disturbing global pattern." *The Washington Post*. Jan. 2020. Web. 30 Jan. 2022. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/29/turkeys-marry-your-rapist-bill-is-part-of-a-disturbing-global-pattern/>>.
- Dovey, Lindiwe. "New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmaker." *Feminist Africa* 16, (2012): 1 -36.
- Giwa-Isekeiji, Jumoke. "Peeking through the Opomulero Lens: Tunde Kelani's Women on Center Stage." *The Global South* 7.1 (2013): 98-121.
- Haynes, Jonathan. *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "TK in NYC: An Interview with Tunde Kelani." *Postcolonial Text*, 3.2, (2007): 1- 16.
- Hook, Bell. (1994). When Brothers are Batterers. *Essence* 25.
- Aleksandra Izgarjan and Slobodanka Markov, Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives, Past and Present." *Gender Studies*, (January 2012) 304.
- Khomami, Nadia. "#MeToo: How a Hashtag became a Rallying Cry against Sexual Harassment." *The Guardian*, United Kingdom. Oct. 2017. Web. 19 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment/>>.
- Joshua Murphy, "Tunde Kelani's *Thunderbolt*: African Video for African Audiences," *The Experience of Cinema*, Vol. 11. 6 (2007) n. pag. Web. 30 Mar. 2014, <https://www.offscreen.com/view/thunderbolt>.
- Narrow Path, The*. Directed by Tunde Kelani. English, VCD Mainframe. 2007.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976. Print.
- Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." *FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM: INTRODUCTORY READINGS*, EDITED BY Gerald M. and Marshall C. 2nd Edition, Oxford: OUP, 1979. Print.
- Shaka, Femi. and Uchendu, Ola, N. "Gender Representation in Nollywood Video Film Culture." *The Crab Journal of Theatre and Media Arts* 7, (2012): 1-30.
- Soetan, Olusegun. "The Hearthstone: Language, Culture, and Politics in the Film of Tunde Kelani." *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Science Journal*, 8.2 (2018): 1-26.
- Sultana, Abeda. "Patriarchy and Women Subjugation: A Theoretical Analysis." *Arts Faculty Journal, University of Dhaka*, July 2010 – June 2011.
- Thunderbolt/Magun*. Directed by Tunde Kelani. English, Yoruba, and Igbo, VCD, Mainframe. 2001.
- Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford, UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1990. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Print.
- Yeku, James, "Womanism and Arugba." *The Nigerian Voice*. Web. 1 Jun. 2014. <http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/100359/1/womanism-and-arugba.html>>.

#### Author Bio:

Lillian Shoroye, PhD is a lecturer in the department of Mass Communication, Dominion University, Ibadan, Nigeria, where she teaches film studies. Her research focuses on postcolonial studies, gender representations in films and adaptations in Nollywood. Her book review has appeared in the *Journal of African Cinemas* and she contributed a chapter to *Human Trafficking in Africa: New Paradigms, New Perspectives* (Springer Link, 2021).

## The Marginalized Mudbloods and The Squibs of Hogwarts: A Study of 'Disability' Through A Medium of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

Debangana Basu<sup>1</sup>

Ph.D. Scholar, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Mail i.d.- [debangabasu.33@gmail.com](mailto:debangabasu.33@gmail.com) | Orcid- [0000-0002-1470-2025](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1470-2025)

Dr. Paromita Mukherjee<sup>2</sup>

Associate Professor, Deputy Director and Head of the Institution, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Mail i.d. - [pmukherjee@kol.amity.edu](mailto:pmukherjee@kol.amity.edu) | Orcid - [0000-0002-5058-3326](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5058-3326)

### Abstract

**Abstract:** It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that disability studies were initialized in the West with some of the seminal works of scholars like Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman. The disability studies essentially gave a voice to those people who were denied social justice, and it was not only considered as a medical problem anymore; rather it was a major social issue. Apart from some of the major classics, if one can take a look inside the pop culture texts, then J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series would present before us an array of such issues concerning marginalized disabled people. In this paper, we would like to show the unfortunate treatment of such 'disabled' people in the magical world of Hogwarts, keeping in parallel view the sorrowful situation of our real world as well, based on the theoretical grounds laid down by Foucault and Goffman. Also, we intend to shed some light on the identity formation of the disabled group, which is directly linked with gender, race, and class. It is also our intention to reflect on the fact that disability is something which is not to be "fixed" but rather embraced and normalized, to achieve an egalitarian society.

**Keywords:** Disability Studies, Racism, Stigma, Marginalization, Disability

### Introduction

The major studies related to feminism, racism, and sexism had stirred up a storm in the cultural and literary field with its path-breaking norms and reformations. Amidst that, another most important and necessary problem to be looked at is the treatment of disabled people through the lens of disability studies. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the disability rights movement had gained its initiation and many of the notable theories we get on this social model of disability studies, are majorly from scholars like Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault. In the U.S. and the U.K., the activists who belonged to



the disabled group started to claim that they were kept away from enjoying the basic rights which are needed to survive, and they formed their group to show their solidarity against such oppression inflicted on them. Ed Roberts, the leader of this 'disabled group' called these people, "one of the largest minority groups in the nation" (Mambrol).

In this paper, I have aimed to bring forth the plight of this minority group and show how because of the social stigmatization and being labelled as the 'disabled' group, they are treated as the outcasts of society, through the medium of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. As for my theoretical base, Shelley Tremain's *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Erving Goffman's *Stigma*, and Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* would serve as a strong base for the development of this discussion. In addition to this, my intention will also be to establish the fact that this problem of disability is something, which should not be 'fixed'; rather, it should be addressed with a broad mind and that could only happen with some major changes within the governmental structure and the social attitude of the place we reside.

In his work *Stigma*, which was published in 1963, Goffman talks about those people in society, who are different from what we 'normally' expect people to be. He also discusses the way it feels to be treated like the vermin of society and how they are excluded from being wholly accepted by society (Crossman).

### **The Marginalized and Silenced Squibs of Hogwarts**

In the world where we live, the world which is 'normal', disabled people can belong from different spectrums of society – they can be prostitutes, physically deformed people, and mentally unstable patients. Goffman talks about three kinds of stigmas in his book, out of which, I am particularly going to focus on the stigma of group identity while dealing with Rowling's portrayal of stigmatized individuals in the Potter series. Foucault's idea of disability can be found in one of his most famous works *History of Sexuality*, where he talks about the body being treated as a problem, and being controlled, socially managed, and isolated, thus hinting to be disabled and unfit for society's normal functioning. In *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Tremain talks about the effects of the governmental power, in controlling and subduing the disabled group of society.

All these notions of these thinkers, when brought under one umbrella and clubbed together, provide an interesting and insightful revelation, as far as the disabled and the 'abnormal' group of society is concerned. It is not quite normal to witness the implementation of disability studies in books meant primarily for children's reading, but this amalgamation of the two must be made, to shape the little, young minds correctly. A child's mind is said to be very easy to mould; and some lessons are necessary to be inculcated early, to change their worldview positively.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* engages primarily with the story of a boy "who lived". After surviving the death curse of the most feared wizard of the magical realm, Lord Voldemort, he garners all the attention from the two worlds – both the muggle one and

the wizarding one. Therefore, at the very beginning of the story, one would just not find a trace of any sort of marginalization and maltreatment of any inferior class anywhere in the narrative. However, as the series starts to gain its pace, the entire dimension changes from the perspective of the focus. From the main character of the novel, and his quest to establish order in the wizarding world by defeating evil, the narrative also extends its branches to deal with one of the most rooted issues of our society. By the story ends, we as readers, witness Harry's agenda of defeating Voldemort; but one problem remains unresolved till the end – that is, the stigmatization of the Squibs. The Squibs are those, who have at least one magical parent but, they do not possess any magical power. For this reason, they are treated as outcasts of society and are denied the right to study at Hogwarts. While some are fortunate enough still to remain inside and work for the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, some others are dictated to and forced to live among the muggles and study the normal courses of the muggles. Rowling, in the Potter series, introduces us to many such Squibs such as Argus Filch, Arabella Figg, Ariana Dumbledore, Merope Gaunt, and a cousin of Ron Weasley. Out of them, the most prominent and highlighted ones are Argus Filch and Arabella Figg, as they are quite an integral part of the series' progression.

It is debatable, whether Rowling intentionally depicted these characters as such or not, but one gets a highly negative impression of them when introduced to them for the first time – both in terms of physical appearance, as well as their conduct. Rowling describes Filch as a person with protruding eyes, and as for Arabella Figg, she is described as a “mad old lady... [whose] the whole house smelled of cabbage” (Rowling 23). Also, Voldemort's mother, Merope Gaunt is described as having “her hair was lank and dull, and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face.” (Rowling, 172). This physically ‘abnormal’ appearance indicates the way these disabled people are portrayed in a negative light. A feeling pervades throughout the series that they are a harmful and unhealthy lot of society, made to be ignored and discarded.

Squibs then are treated as someone, who had taken birth with some sort of a disease, which is essentially the lack of magical blood in their veins. In disability studies, people are quite habituated to think disability as a medical problem, ingrained within the body of a person. Under that light, they are easily labelled as the ‘inferior’ and ‘damaged’ group of society. Discrimination is something that they face at every single step of their lives, and they have no other choice but to live with it because they are stigmatized as not “normal”. Henceforth, another term gets attached to these disabled people, which resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the perception towards women. It is the concept of ‘Other’. Disabled people also fall under this category of ‘Other’, who are nothing but the ‘extras’ of the world. After a point of time, one must realize then, when Beauvoir said, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Hengehold, 1-24) that the construct is not determined by biology; but is a social construct that stems from the mindset of the society itself.

Thus, we find that the Squibs are reduced to mere nothingness and have no such individual importance where they should belong and also in society at large. They are

silenced, as their views have no weightage to play a role in the Ministry (the governmental structure of the wizarding world), and it will be clearer in the further discussion of their maltreatment in the hands of the dominating and powerful lot of the magical realm. Also, another interesting fact comes into focus, when the readers notice that there is even inter-discrimination regarding the treatment of Squibs in the Potter series. While Argus Filch, is kept within the premises of Hogwarts but is treated like an unimportant person, Arabella Figg on the other hand, despite residing in the muggle world, holds a position in the Order of the Phoenix. Also, she is called to testify in the Ministry when Harry goes through a trial for performing an underage wizard spell.

### **Squibs' Rights in Question**

In the entire series, Filch has been kept inside the premises of Hogwarts, true, but his position is so derogatory, that it has reduced him only to be the caretaker of Hogwarts. Nonetheless, Filch does his duty with utmost honesty but his attitude towards the students is ruthless and sour because of the fact of his disability to do magic while 'they' can. Filch's grievance regarding his position despite being allowed to be inside Hogwarts may also stem from the fact that another Squib like him enjoys certain rights to a certain extent in an important organization like the Order of Phoenix. Arabella Figg's position is restored to some extent because of her inclusion in the Order of Phoenix, which is a secret chain of some wizards and witches who are uprising against Voldemort. Filch could never be sympathetic, nor compassionate because of the treatment he has always received but Arabella proves herself to be an important addition with her likeable characteristics.

This majorly hints at the fact that those disabled people, who can add value to the able-bodied people in society, are given somewhat bearable importance. Here, Mrs. Figg's usefulness to the Order of Phoenix, as well as when she comes to testify in Harry's trial, places her just above an inch of Filch. These portrayals of disabled people by Rowling, pose a serious threat to the young minds of the children, who are the primary target audience of Rowling. Since the budding minds do not understand the complex notion of disability and the limited rights of the Squibs, they look at these characters with contempt on a sheer basis of hatred because of their behaviour towards the students of Hogwarts. This will make them believe that discriminating between people belonging to lower rank and upper rank is normal and natural, which in turn will blur their judgment between right and wrong.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*, when Dolores Umbridge temporarily replaces Professor Dumbledore as the headmistress, Filch becomes her ardent follower, because, for the first time, his notions are given importance, which is against the betterment of students. While this hatred for the students and punishing them for no reason may downright seem to be a ruthless act on his part if given a deeper thought, this reaction is because of the inhuman actions taken against him all along. On the contrary, Figg's importance in the Order of Phoenix makes her a civil and likable character, who contributes quite a lot to the organization. This proves how, within the



same community, the difference in treatment matters and shapes their attitude and behaviour accordingly.

### **Disabled by the Government**

Arabella Figg's situation is quite not in sync with the clash with the governmental structure, but Foucault's theory of disability and government relates a lot with the situation of Argus Filch. Shelley Tremain, in her *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, gives a detailed insight into the theories of Foucault on this issue. Shelley states that "power functions best when it is exercised through productive constraints, which is when it enables subjects to act to constrain them" (Tremain, 9-24). Foucault here stresses the role that power plays in determining disability, and he asserts here that, power is not treated as a repressive force, but it limits and constrains the types of choices a person can make. It is very much visible in the case of Figg's relationship with the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry acts as the government of the wizarding world and Figg comes in more direct contact with the Ministry than any other Squibs mentioned in the Potter series. This makes her all the more constrained by the Ministry and it is visibly seen too in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. When Figg comes to testify during Harry's trial because he performs underage wizardry, Cornelius Fudge, the Minister, humiliates her by questioning her bloodline and mocking her by saying that 'Squibs' cannot see Dementors. After she leaves the courtroom, Fudge adds by saying, "not a very convincing witness" (Rowling 134). This attitude of the government towards the Squibs shows their plight and the derogatory manner in which they are treated because of their disability. Interestingly, Figg is so habituated to this behaviour that she cannot protest against it anymore. This indicates the way the government has infused the fact in their mind, that they are made to be treated in this manner, and they have normalized this for the Squibs in general as well. Therefore, Foucault was very much right in saying that the group that holds the ultimate power, can only hold on to that power by normalizing this process of making the inferior subjects feel worthless and unfit to live in society.

It does not stop here, however, because the Squibs are banned by the government from procreating, buying or selling things within the wizarding world. Turning back to the theory of Michel Foucault, "productive constraints" (Rhodes 139) are something that is employed mostly by the Order of Phoenix, rather than the Ministry. Figg is allowed to be a part of the Order, but she is restricted from attending other events of Harry despite being Harry's guardian in the Muggle domain. Although she is given a somewhat respectable position within the Order, she is barred from everything related to the Ministry of Magic.

### **Educational Restraint by Imposing Discipline**

As it has been established by now, the Squibs are a blotch on their bloodline, and they are a shame to society. But it is not only the Squibs, who are problematic to society. The non-wizard folks, who are also termed as 'muggles' are also treated as a disabled group

- their 'disability' being, their incapability to perform magic at all. However, putting that aside, it must be taken into account that, the inclusion of Squibs, and their eligibility to stay in the wizarding world, does not in any way solely depend on the fact whether they are magically able or not. On the contrary, Squibs can be the most useful in the magical society, if they are provided with the right sort of education.

The Ministry, who despise the Squibs as if they are the untouchable creatures on earth, can easily provide some sort of work to them and make use of their hard-working trait. There are some departments in the Ministry itself, which do not require any form of wand waving. Those departments easily function based on hard work and intelligence. Provided the opportunity, the Squibs can turn out to be the most useful in contributing to those departments. Instead of letting them learn and grow out from their disability, the only validation that can save them from being ousted from their society is the acceptance letter from Hogwarts. Their acceptance in the school determines their place in their world.

On this note, a similar picture can be found relatable in our real world, where education becomes a far-fetched dream for some, who are 'disabled'. Still, there are some children in our society, who are deprived of education because of either their physical disability or mental disability. They are stigmatized and marginalized and are made to accept the notion that they do not belong in society to live a normal life with others. A secondary class is a label, which gets attached to them, thus the dominating power establishing their authority. According to Vlachou-Balafouti opines, "Education is an 'enabling good' [because] it is required to obtain other social goods, such as income, employment, and self-esteem." (Saraco 23). In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural and social capital become two very important parameters to look at the problems the Squibs face in attending school.

So, cultural capital is a set of skills and knowledge we possess, just by being in this social sphere and it also helps us in climbing the social ladder. In Hogwarts, the ability to cast spells with the wand, and pass the O.W.L.S. examination, are considered to be necessary to complete one's education. This is the arena, from where the Squibs are erased, and as a result of that, they are unable to gain any sort of education, to be of any use to society. Bourdieu's concept of social capital, on the other hand, talks about the status one gains individually and uses that solitary power to exert on a particular group, resulting in the division of class and stratification. Status and gaining privilege are the two things that matter in Hogwarts a lot.

The school provides the wizards and witches with connections, which help them to feel important and proud. Such a special connection is established by Professor Slughorn, and he names the club 'Slug Club'. The Squibs, however, remain outside the boundary of receiving proper education, let alone getting the opportunity to make connections and friendships.

Foucault, in one of his most famous works, *Discipline and Punish*, terms the school as a kind of institution with an agenda of supervising and ameliorating the abnormal (Roberts 138). These schools, according to Foucault, regulates and “discipline” society, until the dominant ideologies get embedded within their mind, and they start believing and seeing certain things in a particular way. Hogwarts then turns out to be a ‘Foucauldian prison’, where the residents of the magical realm are trained successfully to believe certain rules and practices are for the betterment of the school and the wizarding world. Thus, the fact that the Squibs cannot attend the school of Hogwarts, is a much-normalized notion for them as they have learned to believe that they are disabled to get enrolled in Hogwarts and receive a proper education. The Squibs too do not expect otherwise, as they are also disciplined to believe that they do not have the authority to be educated in Hogwarts.

## Conclusion

The overall aim of this paper was to lay open the miserable condition of the marginalized Squibs in Rowling’s magical world, under the light of disability studies. Through the lens of J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world, it was also my intention to show how, the children who are from our real world, if found disabled, are treated as the outcasts of society. The social model of disability states, that the Squibs do not have any problem; and neither the children of our muggle world. The problem lies within society; the problem is the mentality that has been imbued within our minds. It is the way society has learned to think as a result of disciplining by a certain power group and now, eradicating such thoughts has turned out to be almost impossible. Hogwarts, as an institution, itself is responsible for disabling the Squibs whereas, they could have been allowed to take up other subjects other than those that required the usage of the wand.

Again, the Ministry and the Order of Phoenix are different in treating the Squibs, yet the Order imposes some restraints, apart from giving them some importance, just to remind us once again, that discrimination still exists. Children belonging to our world, also faces time and time again, a similar kind of discrimination, when after being termed as “special” children”, they are sent away to special institutions to get special education. Although they might have the same level of intelligence as other “normal” kids, just because of their physical or mental disability they are marginalized. It is quite ironic in this sense that, we always tend to say that all children are special. Then it becomes a confusing issue how this differentiation of special occurs within the category of “special”. What do we mean then when we generalize and attach the label of the word “special” to all the children and then pick up some from that lot and marginalize them as a different kind of “special”? Although this discrimination has been stopped as per the Equality Act of 2010, still, in some places and some countries, till now we tend to treat those people differently, who seem “abnormal” to us.

It is very much natural to have diversity in a particular society. Therefore, admitting Squibs to Hogwarts and giving them a place where they belong is as normal as a child from our real world getting his or her deserved place in society. At every step, if we fear



that raising our voice would lead to social agitation, then the transformation of the 'disabled' to an "abled" individual will not be possible. Yes, it is a fact that we need certain norms and rules in our society to live or else chaos will ensue. However, when those norms become shackles and promote ethically wrong rules, then such norms must be dismantled to create unity and remove the barrier of disability from society for good.

## References

- DeFleur, Melvin L., and Erving Goffman. "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity." *Social Forces*, vol. 43, no. 1, Oct. 1964, p. 127. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2575995>.
- Hengehold, Laura. *Simone De Beauvoir's Philosophy of Individuation: The Problem of the Second Sex*. Edinburgh UP, 2017.
- Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Disability Studies." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 8 May 2021, [literariness.org/2018/12/15/disability-studies-2](http://literariness.org/2018/12/15/disability-studies-2).
- Rhodes, Megan. "Harry Potter and the Stigma of Disability: Squibs as Outsiders to the Magical Universe." *The George Washington University Undergraduate Review*, vol. 3, Jan. 2020, [https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.3\(2020\).06](https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.3(2020).06).
- Roberts, Richard, and Florence Bernault. "Enfermement, Prison, Et Chatiments En Afrique: Du 19<sup>e</sup> Siecle a Nos Jours." *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, Jan. 2000, p. 137. <https://doi.org/10.2307/220265>.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Bloomsbury, 2007.
- . *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Pottermore Publishing, 2015.
- Saraco, Maureen. "Squibs, Disability and Having a Place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." *Routledge eBooks*, 2019, pp. 18–31. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322792-3>.
- Tremain, Shelley. "Foucault and the Government of Disability." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 75–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410600570972>.

## The Stage (*Rangomancho*)

An English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's article *Rangomancho*

Dr Manish Prasad<sup>1</sup>

Assistant Professor

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata.

West Bengal, India.

Mail Id: [drmanish.asansol@gmail.com](mailto:drmanish.asansol@gmail.com) | Orcid- [0009-0006-4034-6091](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4034-6091)

Dr Prasant Chakraborty<sup>2</sup>

Retired Associate Professor, BBM College, Agartala, Tripura.

Mail Id: [prasantaread@gmail.com](mailto:prasantaread@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The present English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's article RANGOMANCHO originally written in Bengali provides special attention to the importance of dialogues in framing the identity of the actors on stage. Further, the translation here talks about different methodologies of stage performances with particular reference to the role of an audience in making the performance successful. In the end, the translation provides a picturesque presentation of the role of JATRA in making the theatrical performance cost-effective and audience-centric simultaneously.

**Keywords:** Performance, Stage, Jatra, Actor, Verse

### Translators' Note

Recently, we came across, Dr. Satyabrata Rout, a legendary figure in Modern Indian drama. He is not into acting but his theory of scenography has given him immense popularity among the Indian dramatists. A Professor in the Drama department of Hyderabad University, he was in Agartala on 14th June 2023 to attend a workshop organized by the National School of Drama. We took the opportunity to interact with him. While he was elaborating on his theory of Scenography, we had a feeling that the concept of scenography may have its roots in an article by Rabindranath Tagore entitled RANGOMANCHO (The Stage) originally written in Bengali. Surprisingly, Dr. Rout said he did not know Tagore's article. Thereafter we searched for the English translation of the article. However, we failed to find any translation of such an article. At this, we decided to go for a new venture to undertake the project of translating into English this composition so that a new perspective of research and performance can be opened up for the performers and the artists at the transnational levels.

A detailed description of the theatre is given by Bharata Muni in his classic THE NATYA SASTRA but one can hardly find any reference to the importance of visuals or setting in the text. However, the entire theory is presented in such a systematic way that there hardly seems to be any gap for this lacuna.

There is always a full-fledged glorification of Arts wherever she [arts] finds her exclusivity. However, as she has to adjust to a rival, she has to be self-effacing especially when her competitor tends to be dominant. For that reason, if one tries to have a tuned reading of the Ramayana from the first book i.e. ADIKANDA to the last or seventh trunk of the Ramayana i.e. UTTARKANDA at the same pitch, then that melody loses its distinctiveness and as a result fails to attract interest as a raga; moreover, it becomes wearisome throughout. A poetic composition of high quality has the vigour to create its ASSONANCE melody. Therefore, the addition of music to the reading appears extraneous and benumbing. This superior poetry snubs, as it were, these musical notes into a merely fatigued irritable sound. Again, the finest classical music can be a self-achiever; it may not need the assistance of Kalidasa or Milton to accomplish its loftiness. With petty words like TUM TANANA, classical music can create some of the finest tunes on earth. In that case, mingling words and pictures with songs may become a part of fine art and a consumer product that can be saleable in the market, but it will never find the majestic height expected in a classical music concert.

Nevertheless, a production on the stage enjoys less freedom than a recital. Thus, the accomplishment of a staged play is more or less subjected to external assistance and acting here appears as of paramount importance which needs to be acknowledged.

Unfortunately, people do not accept this. The way a vestal wife wants none other than her husband, a good piece of poetry anticipates a critic to enjoy its essence and beauty. It is often noticed that while reading a piece of literature we go on acting as well although not physically but conceptually. Similarly, any KAVYA [poetry] that fails to unravel its beauty through such conceptual acting does not beget fame for its composer.

Conversely, it can be said that the art of acting counts on other elements. Thus, acting eagerly waits for the text of the orphaned play to come and undoubtedly all its fame depends on the reputation of the text of the play.

An effeminate husband becomes an object of mockery in his locality. Likewise, if the text of a play is wholly bent on its performers only ignoring other factors, then it too becomes ludicrous. The text of the play should have an air that if it is not staged, then it is bad luck for the actors. It will not harm, in any way, the text of the play.

Therefore, acting is subjugated by KAVYA. But it does not mean by any means that it has to be subservient to all other aspects of fine art. Rather, to uphold its stature,



acting should stoop down only to that extent which is required for its growth. And if something more is added to it than that will only defame the art of acting.

It is needless to say, dialogues uttered in a play are the most significant part for an actor. The actor has to smile or giggle on the stage with whatever words or sentences provided by the dramatist. Moreover, he has to make the audience weep with his acting using the vocals of the poet. But what for is the picture? It hangs behind the actor. The actor has no role in its creation; it's but a painting only. For me, this reveals the incompetence and cowardliness of one's performance when the actor has to rely on that picture. In such circumstances, it often seems that the actor is begging the painter when he uses the painting to make his task easier by creating confusion among the audience. Further, do you [the actors] feel like that those who came to enjoy your performance have the slightest intellectual ability? Are they merely the childish extinct? Can't one rely on the audience's intellectual ability? If not, then tickets should not be sold to these spectators even if they pay double the price of the tickets. Theatre does not require any witness as in a courtroom to testify its capability. Why should the audience be cheated particularly when they have come to the theatre to get enjoyment out of a make-believe situation? These spectators don't go to the theatre keeping their imaginative faculty under lock and key at home. A part of the theatrical episode will be communicated by the artist and their art, while the other part will be understood by the audience themselves. Thus, a good rapport can be created between the artists and the spectators.

For instance, King Dushyant is having a loving interaction with Shakuntala and her companions are hiding behind a tree trunk. This is a very important scene in ABHIGYAN SHAKUNTALAM and for the audiences as well to understand the romantic rhythm of the play. In such a case the conversation must be emotive. The spectator hardly needs the presence of a tree trunk on stage to get this scenic effect. They must have this much creative imagination to enjoy the play without seeing a trunk in reality. It is challenging to replicate authentically the attitude or the voice of-Shakuntalaa or Anasuya and Priyamvada as in reality but when one witnesses the rendering of these characters on stage; one may have an emotional attachment to the visuals; or else, it will be a grave distrust towards the audience if replications of two trees, a house, or a river are added on stage as these are not at all difficult to conceive.

That's why I like our indigenous JATRA [theatre]. There is no such distance between the actors and the audience here. On the contrary, there is mutual trust and warmth between the two, which gives the JATRA smooth sailing. The RASA of the JATRA, which is primary, is spread by the actors on stage through their skilful acting all around the audience like a fountain, which the spectators receive jubilantly. For example, When Malini [a character] is wasting her time in vainly searching for flowers in her garden, there is no need to bring on stage big flowerless trees to prove it; rather the whole of the garden, it seems, is felt by the audience in the performance of Malini. If it doesn't

happen, Malini, the actress is utterly abortive. In that case, for what reason the audience will come and wait in the JATRA like a wooden puppet?

One may opine that if Kalidasa had given attention to the stage and setting of ABHIGYAN SHAKUNTALAM, he would have dropped the scene of the chariot running after the doe. But, since he was a great poet and so the chariot may stop but not his pen. My observation is why one should persecute something vital than the other which is relatively trivial. The dais is already set within the contemplative mind; there is hardly any lack of space on this stage. There the magician cum poet recreates the scenes one after another. The dramatist's objective is to attain that stage and scene. The poet's creativity can hardly be affected by any simulated stage or scene.

Therefore when Dushyanta and his chariot driver stand in the same place and share the speed of the chariot through their dialogue and their performance, the audience can easily appreciate that the stage is small but not the imaginative faculty of the poet. So, for the sake of KAVYA, the spectators are gladly ready to exonerate the shortcomings of the stage. They add their passion and creativity to take this small stage to a magnificent height. Conversely, if KAVYA had to be truncated for the sake of the stage, then there would be hardly anyone in the audience to endure the unfortunate wooden structures of the stage.

One may find that there is hardly any reference to external locations in the play ABHIGYAN SHAKUNTALAM, which means deep down, the play itself has created a setting of its own. Thus, in the process of referring to the hermitage of KARNA or MARICH and giving a detailed description of his realm of clouds on the way to heaven, the poet has not given any thought to any external setting. It has become a perfect play by itself. Both in character portrayal and in disposition, the dramaturge depends on the poetic abilities.

In one of my articles, I argued that Europeans are never satisfied merely with ideas. For them, the creative faculty should be concretized by objects from hard-core realism to allure the childish minds of the spectators. One can rarely find that they are satisfied with the lifesaving VISHALYAKARANI faculty of poetry. They also want the physical existence of the whole of GANDHAMADAN Mountain.

It's Kaliyug now and to bring GANDHAMADAN Mountain down to the stage requires technological assistance, which is often highly expensive. The Europeans spent so much on these stage props that many grave famines can be resolved in India with the money spent on those props.

In the Orient, all the activities including games and sports, or any entertainment of the sort are simple and easily available. One might have witnessed that we often finish our feast in a banana leaf; similarly, we can also relish the real pleasure of such a feast. In other words, we can easily invite the whole world into our hut without any SHILLY

SHALLY. In the case of an expensive and complex arrangement, the real pleasure of such a feast would have been lost.

The theatre we are performing obsessed with English stagecraft is getting overburdened with so many props and costumes. It is difficult to move it from its present settings and to uplift it to the highest rank is also impossible. The owl of Goddess *Laxmi* has already overshadowed the lotus of Goddess *Saraswati*; the impact of consumerism has grown deeper and broader than the aesthetics wings. What I mean to state is that the wealth of the rich will outshine the talent of the poet and the creative artist in such a situation. If the audience is not interested in accepting the childishness of the English stage and if the actor has faith in his ability to perform even on *Kavya*, then it will be good for a kind-hearted true Indian aesthetician and artist to sweep away all the compost of the English props and open the stage by re-establishing its past own glory. Imitating a garden on stage or presenting a woman character with a woman are the concepts developed by the English stage, which one must dissolve. The time has arrived to decry it fervently.

Therefore, it can be said that the complexity is an outcome of inability. If reality enters art like a glass worm, it sucks all the passion from art like a cockroach. Thus, when the hunger for emotion in art is played out, we find a gradual increase in the use of costly props on stage. Moreover, it is the amassed accessories that overshadow what is primary in performance.

## References

- “Complete Set of 27 Volumes: Rabindro Rochonaboli সম্পূর্ণ সাতাশ খণ্ড রবীন্দ্র রচনাবলী : Rabindranath Tagore, রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর.” *Internet Archive*, 9 Sept. 1950, [archive.org/details/RABINDRARACHANABALI/RABINDRA%20RACHANABALI%20-%203RD%20VOL](https://archive.org/details/RABINDRARACHANABALI/RABINDRA%20RACHANABALI%20-%203RD%20VOL).



## Precarity of Self: Identifying the Liminal Borders of Self in Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*

L. Swathi<sup>1</sup>

Doctoral Scholar (NFOBC – JRF), Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

Mail Id: [swathi.english@buc.edu.in](mailto:swathi.english@buc.edu.in) | Orcid- [0000-0002-1250-0198](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1250-0198)

Dr. B. Padmanabhan<sup>2</sup>

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

Mail Id: [padmanabhan@buc.edu.in](mailto:padmanabhan@buc.edu.in) | Orcid- [0000-0001-7395-126X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7395-126X)

### Abstract

This research paper explores the liminal state of existence and self-identity of ordinary people in the militarised state of Kashmir. In doing so, it aims to conceptually examine the precarity of self and the sequential element, vulnerability in Shahnaz Bashir's novel, *The Half Mother*. The insurgency and violence of 1990s caused by the political and religious disputes necessitated militarisation in the territory. Violence and conflicts further emerged in the process of imposing law and order by troops in the forms of abduction and investigation of civilians on the pretext of suspicion stimulated the precarity of existence and identity of ordinary Kashmiris. In the case of Bashir's novel, it narrates the uncertainty of existence, self and psyche of the protagonist Haleema, whose son goes missing in the militarised region giving her an indefinite status, 'Half Mother'. The state of precarity discusses the sense of diffused identity and the vulnerability experienced by the victims of violence. Hence, this article employs Judith Butler's concept of precarity explained in *Precarious Lives* to construe the state of vulnerability and the effectuated dehumanisation due to precarity of self through Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*. Further, the paper also identifies the liminal state of the protagonist from the stages of self and existence questioning the human rights violations of the perpetrators.

**Keywords:** Kashmir conflict, precarity, self, vulnerability, human rights.

### Introduction

Borderlands and borderland communities remain prone to invasion, surveillance, and control. This scenario provides unrestricted authority to the nation state for the establishment of new political, social, and cultural entities. Borderland communities are exposed to frequent transitions due to foreign interventions contributing to the prevalence of state of liminality concerning the identity of the inhabitants with respect

to place, culture, and society. In addition to the heterogenous perspectives on identity, borderland is also considered as a liminal space for its geographical positioning. Borderland characterises a division between two geographical land masses, whereas the borderland communities are exposed to multiple cultures and societies representing the impossible situation of the population to monopolise their regional identity between the invisible borders. Borderland communities represent the state of liminality as remarked by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as

I now call it *Nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either – you are in a kind of transition. (as cited in Scott and Tuana 1)

Gloria Anzaldúa's *nepantla* and precarity are similar ideas that demonstrate the aspects of uncertainty in existence. Precarity manifests existential problem, problem of reproduction of life and vulnerability. Precariousness of existence is observed through the establishments of unreliable infrastructures of continuity and insecurity of social positioning. Normalcy in life becomes the problem of reproduction of life which is affected by the uncertainty of temporality. The combination of uncertainty in existence and temporality precipitates vulnerability which further induces precarization. Though the actuality of self-precarization is prevalent, precarity in society "as a category of order that denotes social positioning of insecurity and hierarchization, which accompanies processes of Othering", (Puar 165) indicates the external imposition of precariousness.

Oriental notions emphasis the precariousness of the other being imposed by the face on the pretext of an inaccurate conception of moral binding of the other. Those moral images constructed by the face manifest the emergence of othering. Butler comments on the disagreement of the process or othering as "this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. . . it tends to ruin my plans" (Butler 130). The othering and the faulty stereotypical image form an important place in the social positioning which determines precariousness. Precarity is plausibly discussed with aspects like place, culture, society, and self. Precarity of self focuses on the mental precarity defining the inner turmoil of identifying self. In *Borderlands*, where precarity is an innate characteristic, identifying self in a multicultural community is intricate. Researchers have discussed the in-between-ness experienced by the borderland communities through the concepts of *nepantla* and precarity to elucidate the intricacy in establishing normal livelihood.

The subject of the research paper focuses on the precarity experienced by the people of Kashmir. The region of Kashmir, often described as the crown of India, is surrounded by Pakistan, Afghanistan and China precipitating geopolitical conflicts over the border state. The state is considered to be the 'unfinished agenda of colonisation'

referring to the unsettled demarcation of Indo-Pakistan border of Kashmir which is a repercussion of partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. The basic infrastructure of Kashmir's geography and history clearly exhibit the prevailing precarity in the region. Besides the disruption caused by the division of political boundaries, the impact of it is also reflected in the division of religious and cultural ideologies among the populace. Due to social unrest in Kashmir, the state authorised military activities maintain absolute control over the region ignoring the moral ethical relations of Kashmiris. Women victims of heightened militarisation face the liminality of the existence by encountering sexual exploitation, and uncertainty of familial relations, i.e., Half mother and Half widows. Here the word 'half' is a connotation for the unsettled status of personal identity which indicates the possibility for both, being one and not. In Kashmir, women, who have lost the men in their family to the insurgency and unsure of their existence are called with the word 'half', as an adjective to their familial status in a way of denoting the probability of the return or forever disappearance of the member. The life of ambiguity experienced by half mothers and half widows induces the psychological instability due to the missing of their loved ones. The prevailing precarity of Kashmir acts as hindrance for the construction of stable identity which also exemplifies the mental borders of in-betweenness experienced by the women. Further, discussions on the social trauma, sense of incompleteness and stigmatisation of half widows and half mothers often fails to probe into the perspectives of precarity, an aspect that forms the primary condition for development of the mentioned problems. This way, the article attempts to understand how precariousness influences the psychological and existential concerns of Kashmiris. This research paper employs the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's precarity in *Precarious Lives* to discern the liminality of existence and identity which perpetuate the effectuated vulnerability and dehumanisation of the people of Kashmir, especially, half mothers and half widows of Kashmir through a textual interpretation of Shanaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*. The novel portrays the women of Kashmir as indirect victims of war by documenting the sufferings of a half mother, Haleema, who awaits the return of her son, a victim of enforced disappearance during the conflict.

### **Precarity of Self**

Judith Butler describes the state of an individual, who experiences precariousness in life due to influences of the 'face', in the form of conceptions and opinions over the 'Others'. Here, the face represents the figure that communicates precariousness to the Other which adopts non-violence to annul human life. The false obligations about the Other, which are mostly external and away from them are addressed by the face against the will of the Others which misleads the notions about their existence developing a precarious life. Butler in her book *Precarious Lives*, addresses the failure of the face in addressing the notions of others as "[t]he structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (Butler 130). Uncertainty of choices due to morality and ethics,



expose the individual to vulnerability and their liminal state of existence. According to Emmanuel Levinas, “My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world . . . To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question” (Levinas 24). The obligation addressed against the interests of the individual and the ethical relation to the self provides the space for precarity. The precariousness of unidentified self and meaning further develops into vulnerability and uncertainty of existence. Pertaining to the Kashmir context, the familial relations of the victims of violence imposed by militarisation are exposed to precariousness in the form of meaningless existence and fractured identity implying to the status of their relationship with the victims. For instance, women as the familial relations of the missing victims of enforced disappearance are addressed with uncertainty as ‘Half Widow’ and ‘Half Mother’. The protesters against the military deployment are arrested as militants and in certain cases, on the pretext of suspicion, they are abducted forcefully by the security forces. The wives and mothers of those informers and innocent victims of suspicion, women who are oblivious of the existence of their loved ones, survive the state of limbo by facing harassment and discrimination socially, economically, physically, and psychologically. Legally, the women are unable to claim their male family members to be alive or dead. The paradoxical state of existence of women in Kashmir exposes the individuals to the contradictions of the consequences of war, humanisation, and dehumanisation. Butler exposes the conditions for precarious lives of the Others caused by the acts of dehumanisation influenced by the face, here it is the state sponsored organisations of security forces against the native populace. The half widows and half mothers represent the Others in experiencing precarious lives due to the categorisation of the population as supporters of militancy by the face and Butler opines the exposure of the vulnerable populace to dehumanisation as

those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. . . there is the use of the face, within the media, in order to effect a dehumanization. It would seem that personification does not always humanize. For Levinas, it may well evacuate the face that does humanize; and I hope to show, personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization (Butler 141).

Though the intention of the security forces is to protect the civilians of Kashmir, the suspicion built over misconceptions of the people of Kashmir results in the imposition of violence which illustrates the personification of dehumanisation. The charges against the civilians as state informers and militants personify the failure of representation which prevails the precarious state of existence of the others imposed by the face.

The images constructed by the security forces on the suspected population with respect to the border security communicates precariousness to the people of Kashmir determining their identity. Haleema, the protagonist of *The Half Mother*, a single mother was supported by her father, Ghulam Rasool Joo and her son, Imran Joo economically,

physically, and emotionally. After the death of her *Ab Jaan*, Haleema lost one of her supporters which was followed by another tragic event – the abduction of her son, Imran Joo who was mistakenly arrested for another neighbourhood militant named Imran Bhat. The unauthorised abduction of Imran subjected Haleema to experience incessant facets of uncertainty. In order to bring back her son and to find clues about his existence, Haleema plunges herself into various stages of uncertainty. In this case, women experiencing similar scenario are given social titles as ‘Half Mother’ and ‘Half Widows’. The voiceless women of Kashmir, who exist without any legal assurance lead a precarious life, which illustrates the notion of Butler on how precarity becomes an identity: “The one with whom I identify is not me, and that ‘not being me’ is the condition of the identification” (Butler 145). Haleema throughout the novel identifies herself as Half Mother – the mother in search of her missing son victimised by the security forces. Women with the status of Half Mother or Half Widow confront social exclusion and the state of liminality in terms of identity and existence which are affected by the social, psychological, and economic interventions. Thereby, the experiences of Haleema, being uncertain to claim herself as a mother or a person without a son, explains how liminal state of personal identity itself determines the identity of an individual in precariousness. The uncertainty of identity also symbolises the state of Kashmir being a land of unsettled border demarcation and that elucidates the influence of border in ascertaining the identity. Therefore, the incertitude of personal identity is a repercussion of geopolitical conflict in the borderlands of Kashmir causing precariousness.

The liminal identity of Half mother not only signifies the position of the individual in the society but also includes the encounters of instable psychological, economic, and social concerns. Haleema experiences moments of doubts which expose her to mental precariousness perceiving the mental borders of the character as a Half Mother. Through the characters, the novel comments on the struggles of precarious lives experienced by half mothers. The mental precariousness of Haleema is described when she is informed about a boy named Imran to be dead. The anxiety created by the revelation of truth expresses the uncertainty experienced by Haleema. The psychological impact caused by the precariousness of Imran’s existence is expressed as,

‘. . . According to the investigation report, something on the body says – I am sorry to say – the boy’s name was Imran. God knows.’. . .

Haleema shrivelled with fear and premonition at this news or rumour or whatever it was. She turned pale at once. Her mouth went absolutely dry, her lips almost chapped. She thought that she could not make it back home, let alone walk outside the mortuary to find an auto-rickshaw. She felt uncertain and weaker. As she walked out of that cold room that smelt of death and disinfectant. She began to shake all over. (Bashir 135)

The possible death of Imran and the uncertainty of his existence stimulates the mental instability of Haleema manifesting her precarity of self. The fear and the consequential

suffering explain the psychological trauma underwent by the character because of the prevailing precarity in her and her son's lives. Imran being the only family member of Haleema, the hope for Imran's existence acts as Haleema's meaning for existence. Imran's abduction, which was performed against the moral authority accentuates the sufferings of the protagonist. The unauthorised abduction performed based on false information pushes the protagonist to the state of precarity – a mother whose son either be living or dead. Women in conflicted zone are directly and indirectly affected by the evils of war, in the context of Kashmir, the experiences of women with 'half' relationship status causes more damage to the sufferings. Butler's observations on vulnerability in precarious lives are demonstrated through the experiences of half widows and mothers which are, "[u]nder the circumstances, pressure mounts on the half-widows . . . they struggle between new roles and responsibilities, on one side, and their own vulnerabilities and deficiencies, on the other. Not being able to bury their loved ones and mourn properly adds to psychological trauma, as they do not get any closure" (Qutab 259). The experiences of Haleema manifest the protagonist's precarity of self which is influenced by external factors, whom Butler calls "nameless elsewhere", here implying to the security forces who are ignorant of the civilians' moral and ethical positions. The fear of uncertain existence induces precariousness which has the ability to "hinder their capability to create their futures. But to live under precarious conditions today means that there is no continuity of time at all anymore" (Paur 173). The hold of precariousness on the mental stability of individuals questions the essence of existence among the people of Kashmir establishing the uncertainty.

According to the notions of precarity, disidentification of the others by the face exposes them to vulnerability and puts their ontological right to existence into question. The false assumptions created by the security forces about the ordinary people of Kashmir assuming them to be supporting the militants and working as informers stimulate the precarity of identity. This liminal state of identification and no identification expose them to violence. Butler explains precarity as a condition for violence that

The face over there, though, the one whose meaning is portrayed as captured by evil is precisely the one that is not human . . . The 'I' who sees that face is not identified with it: the face represents that for which no identification is possible, an accomplishment of dehumanization and a condition for violence. (Butler 145)

The imposition of violence on people who experiences precarious identity and existential vulnerability further escalates the condition for vulnerability and dehumanisation. The antagonist of the novel, Major Kushwaha arrests Imran Joo as a replacement for Imran Bhat for his personal advantages. This unauthorised abduction against all moral consideration was accomplished because of the populace of Kashmir being already exposed to suspicion and a state of uncertain identity, which also includes the family of Haleema. Shahnaz Bashir portrays the vulnerable situation of Haleema and Imran at the time of forced abduction:



Inside Haleema's room, in the dread and uncertainty, Imran shrivelled, waiting for her to open the door. . .

As Haleema unbolted the door, a burly, moustache trooper pushed her aside, forcing his way in. A row of uniformed men frantically burst in behind him. A bunch of them ran upstairs. Major Kushwaha followed . . . The troops who had been left outside in the dark frontyard caught hold of him by the neck of his *pheran*. Imran uttered a shrill shriek. 'Ammi! Save me!'

'Nice boy. Come on,' Major Kushwaha said as if he was luring a kid with toffee.

Haleema ran out, frustrated with fear, sobbing, and tried to wiggle Imran out of the crook of the trooper's arm.

'He is my only son, sir! He...' Haleema was desperate. (Bashir 55)

Haleema's desperation for Imran's freedom illustrates the vulnerability experienced by her. The protagonist faces vulnerability in two faces – continuous threat of suspicion and unauthorised imposition of violence against moral ethics. The imagology technique adopted by the face prevails the temptation to enforce control and violence on the precarious lives. Kashmiris experience vulnerability caused by the denial of freedom through the images that "are constructed for the purpose of defining the unknown Other. What is unknown is dangerous. To define is to have control over it and to dominate it. The image is an efficient way to dominate the unknown Other" (Derezhytska 86). Haleema endures the vulnerability of othering in her native land along with the embedded violence. Haleema represents the unheard voices of Kashmir, whose lamentations are neglected. The protagonist represents the population that was subjected to doubt their existence and endure vulnerability caused by the violence and precipitated by their precarious lives.

Though precariousness is communicated in a non-violent way to annul human life, the further progress of precarity through violence precedes dehumanisation. According to Butler, violence precipitates dehumanisation of the others, the "derealization of loss – the insensitivity to human suffering and death – becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This derealization takes place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained" (Butler 148). The incessant denial of ethical justice and precarity persuades the others to desensitise themselves from the manipulated violence. The security forces resort to the means of dehumanisation by acting ignorant to the voices of existential vulnerability. Haleema stops searching for Imran by desensitising her loss and helps the other family members of the disappeared. The derealization of loss defines the meaningless life lead by the character. As a consequence, Haleema experiences hallucinations and develops an unstable mental state to distinguish between animate

and inanimate objects which witness the tangible existence of dehumanisation. The mental precarity and the effect of dehumanisation of Haleema is described as,

Haleema says she has been talking to the walls since ages – perhaps with the cracks and nails too. She tells me they hadn't responded to her for long, but now they do, 'I swear, I swear...they do. They are decisive when I am riddles with doubts... They talk to me...and...and I heed their advice and their compelling counsel... They are my best friends, these walls.' (Bashir 173)

This excerpt explains the repercussions of dehumanisation against moral authority. The protagonist finds solace through her conversations with the inanimate objects in her house. Haleema hallucinates the existence of Imran through the inanimate objects demonstrating the precarious life experienced by her. Haleema's state of losing the orientation between the mind and body acts as a resultant of the derealization of loss and an expression of numbness towards injustice. Imposition of precarity and violence elaborates the range for dehumanisation which raises the question for human rights. The denial of freedom and voice against false obligations are the primary reasons for the acts of dehumanisation performed by the security forces, especially, in the case of forced disappearances and unauthorised violence. An uncertain state of justice prolongs the precariousness of people. In Haleema's state, the precarity continued till her death because of the precarity of justice.

## Conclusion

Precarity of self is a bilateral sequence—either uncertainty influences dehumanisation or dehumanisation acts a concomitant factor for precarity. Butler exposes the mental contemplation of choosing borders as precarity and the external role played by face in determining the precariousness of the others. The security forces as the face successfully manipulate the populace into precariousness and in contemplating the ontological position of the Others in the society. This way the Kashmir situation exemplifies the state of precariousness and the precarity of self, experienced by the people of Kashmir, and the family of the victims of forced disappearances. Due to divided opinions, the people of Kashmir are uncertain in perceiving their identity pertaining to place of belonging, inconsistent culture of society, political instability, and personal liminality. The collective suffering of uncertainty caused by existential vulnerability and liminality contribute to the sufferings faced by the people of Kashmir, half mothers, and half widows. This justifies the role of Kashmir as a borderland, being a liminal space, to the presence of precarity in all strata of life. Women in Kashmir are indirect victims of precarity, as the abducted individuals are categorised under 'disappeared persons', whereas their family members are labelled with precarity as 'half mothers' and 'half widows' which explains the in-between-ness of women in both war and society. Haleema is unsure of her identity and the dehumanisation influenced by precariousness destroys her mental stability which prompts her to dwell in-between reality and imagination, demonstrating the mental borders. Thus, the prevalence of

uncertainty in the borderlands of Kashmir stimulates the precarity of self and liminality of personal identity among the Kashmiris.

## References

- Bashir, Shahnaz. *The Half Mother: A Novel*. Gurgaon: Hachette India, 2014. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2020. Print.
- Derezhyska, Tetiana. "East-West" Dichotomy in the English Modernist Novel: An Imagological Perspective." *Borders and Beyond: Orient-Occident Crossings in Literature*. Ed. Adam Bednarczyk, Magdalena Kubarek, and Maciej Szatkowski. Vernon Press, 2018. 85–98. Print.
- Lesutis, Gediminas. *The Politics of Precarity*. Routledge, 2021. Print.
- Levinas, Emmanuel, and Richard Kearney. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas." *Face to Face with Levinas*. Ed. Richard A Cohen. Suny Press, 1986. 13–34. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture*. S.L.: Routledge, 2021. Print.
- . *Writing Wrongs*. Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Puar, Jasbir. "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović." *TDR (1988-)* 56.4 (2012): 163–177. Web. 22 Dec. 2020.
- Qutab, Soudiya. "Women Victims of Armed Conflict: Half-Widows in Jammu and Kashmir." *Sociological Bulletin* 61.2 (2012): 255–278.
- Scott, Charles, and Nancy Tuana. "Nepantla: Writing (From) the In-Between." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31.1 (2017): 1. Web. 15 Dec. 2019.



## Reflection, Memory, and the Fine Art of Poetry: Reading *Memories of Words* by Jaydeep Sarangi

Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Mail Id: schakraborty3@kol.amity.edu | Orcid - [0000-0002-2936-222X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2936-222X)

### Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: *Memories of Words*

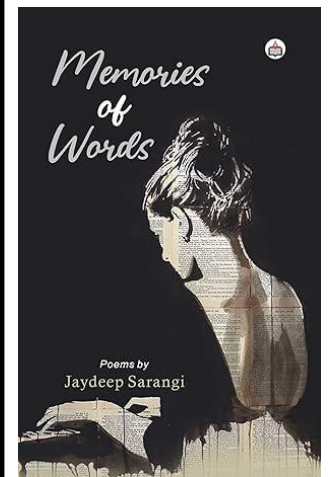
Author: Jaydeep Sarangi

Publisher: Authorspress

Language: English

ISBN: 978-93-5529-967-3

Price: INR 295 | \$ 25



In *Fundamentals of the Art of Poetry*, Oscar Mandel opines: "The work of art is that special form among all the forms created by man for which there is one and only one criterion of success- namely the satisfaction it delivers." (Mandel 24)

It is through this deft work of art that gives birth to Jaydeep Sarangi's poetic peregrination. *Memories of Words*, as his book is titled, is a fine balance of nostalgia, tranquility, memory, and the art of poetic perfection. Memory intertwines with imagery in his poems and gives birth to 'feathers and flute'. There is a semblance of time-travel through spiritual reconstruction, for instance, when he writes:

"If anybody goes for spiritual practices  
Without a veteran guru,  
journey of each inch  
becomes a journey of a thousand kilometers." (Sarangi 66)

In a mere moment, verses paint vivid scenes, resurrecting forgotten landscapes. Words in Sarangi's poetry echo the hues of a sunset or the scent of rain, finalizing moments otherwise lost. Each syllable, a brushstroke; each stanza, a photograph, capturing emotions and experiences in lyrical frames. As a part of the three segments *Tamas*, *Rajas*, and *Sattva* in which the book is divided, the poet's journey represents memory's tapestry, weaving threads of nostalgia and essence into lines that transcend time. He can at once feel how he held his 'father's hand / Crossed time's bed with a boat / I still think they are so, walls with doors.' His recollection of the scenes in Chilkigarh Rajbari becomes a bioscopic vision for all of us, where readers, along with him, anticipate future generation and their interpretation of the 'noises of the stone, panel of dark.'

One interesting observation about *Memories of Words* is that it does not become a strenuous, obscure platter of images. The simplicity of narrative style, mundane images that are contained in rainbows, living cultures, the ghost of his grandfather, and historical knocking at the heart's door- images birthed from memory leap off the page, etching themselves into the reader's consciousness, evoking their own forgotten whispers. Sarangi's poetry, the alchemy of memory and imagery, immortalizes fleeting instants in the heart of verse.

In *Rivers Within: An Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi*, the poet and academician talks to Elisabetta Marino about how for him, 'words never sleep' and how they 'keep happening', 'play a languid game of love and longing to where other forms wait.' It is evident from his poetic contemplation how he gives birth to illumination in thoughts. John Webb, a Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, therefore, writes about Sarangi's poems that they are 'rooted in the world of being and feeling, conjuring up colour and senses and sensibilities, asking how it is that we humans navigate the natural domain, survive the social domain.' For instance, if we read the poem *Memory as my Writing*, we find the waves of his emotion and surging thoughts coalescing into a central point of unanimous poetic reflection:

"My memory is like an old stone lying  
As I cross river beds under an alien sky  
Time's tongue is lolling out of hunger  
From Palm leaves to stones. Writing." (Sarangi 42)

Throughout this expedition, the mind navigates between structured cognition and unbridled creativity. It pivots between order and chaos, harnessing disciplined thought processes while embracing the untamed realms of imagination. This duality in Sarangi's poems fuels the creative journey, birthing the synthesis of structured innovation and unrestrained ideation. If we look at the poem *The Sun Moments for Jayanta Mahapatra*:

“As an obscure man I ask for words  
out of hunger or a summer poem  
looking out for some drops of holy water

My brown flesh is a missing person  
With bare faces in relationships  
lying down with wounds leaking blood.” (Sarangi 35)

It is the poetic humility in the obscure man that has a unique voice in art. The voice asks for words, reminding us of the famous works *Hunger* and *Summer Poem* by the people’s poet Jayanta Mahapatra. ‘Brown flesh’, ‘bare faces’ with ‘wounds leaking blood’ are at once strong, sharp, and vital to the overall progress of the poem. The journey of the mind’s creativity culminates in the materialization of ideas - translating abstract musings into tangible creations. Be it in art, science, literature, or technology, this voyage fuels progress, birthing innovations that redefine paradigms. The poet’s focus is, in essence, the creative journey of the mind, an intricate interplay of thoughts and imagination, where the synthesis of diverse elements births innovation and originality. It embodies the symbiotic relationship between structured cognition and boundless creativity, forging new paths in the expansive landscape of human endeavour.

With much precision, Sarangi writes about the Map Makers, but are the lines and maps only about the external attributes? Are they not the maps of the mind? The vestibules and long-drawn passages of cerebral darkness and luminosity? *Krishna, Life’s Frame, Varanasi, The Sun Moments, History of Waiting Out, The Earth Turned Green, Northern Rivers, Total Blockade, Wheels of Stones, A Passage to Myself* and many other poems in the book circumvent this disciplined thought processes while embracing the untamed realms of imagination. The mind orchestrates poetry, weaving images into existence through metaphor's intricate dance. It births verses, sculpting thoughts into vivid landscapes where emotions take shape.

Like a master painter, the poems wield metaphor to imbue words with hues of deeper meaning, crafting vivid images that linger in our consciousness. Poetry becomes the canvas where the mind’s kaleidoscope of thoughts converges, painting abstract ideas with the brushstrokes of metaphor, etching indelible images upon the soul. Through this alchemy of mind and metaphor, Sarangi’s poetry transcends, evoking emotions that resonate far beyond the mere arrangement of words, in words of *Friendship* as the poet writes:

“One day by the fireside, you will remember  
how you were loved, desired, taken here



I was not for your poems only, not for anything  
only to be with your company, words." (Sarangi 67)

This is perhaps the way in which *Memories of Words* are reborn every moment.

#### Reference:

Mandel, Oscar. *Fundamentals of the Art of Poetry*. A&C Black, 1998.

Marino, Elisabetta. "The Rivers Within: an Interview With Jaydeep Sarangi." *Margins Marges Margins*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2022, pp. 197–206. [www.margins.unical.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/197-206-MARINO\\_ELISABETTA\\_The-Rivers-Within\\_An-Interview-with-Jaydeep-Sarangi-1.pdf](http://www.margins.unical.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/197-206-MARINO_ELISABETTA_The-Rivers-Within_An-Interview-with-Jaydeep-Sarangi-1.pdf).

Sarangi, Jaydeep. *Memories of Words*. Authorspress.

#### Reviewer's details:

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. She is the Chief Editor of a bilingual biannual academic journal *LitInfinite*. 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. A contributor to 25 poetry anthologies, she has also written a novel *Rhododendrons* (Penprints 2023). Her recent work includes *Medusa Says in All* (Poetry, Red River 2024).

## Reviewing Sohini Sen's *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*

Dr. Lalitha Sarma

Postdoctoral scholar, CISTS, IIT Bombay

Mail Id: <mailto:mdrlalithasarma@gmail.com> | Orcid - [0000-0002-0278-2179](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0278-2179)

### Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*

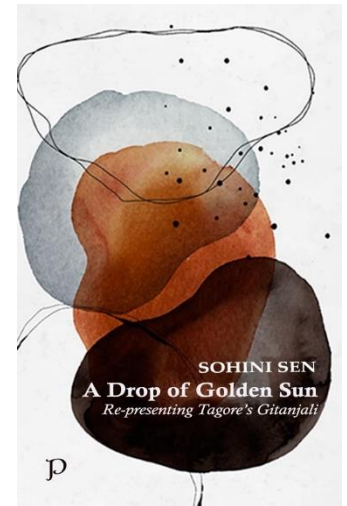
Author: Sohini Sen

Publisher: Penprints

Language: English

ISBN: 978-8196417741

Price: INR 300 | \$ 40



The enterprise of translation is loaded and problematic. It is simultaneously a technical act or a skill, a linguistic process, a semiotic and cultural activity as well as a philosophy. The translator is in a constant tug of war between their responsibility to the source text and its author as well as to the readership. Susan Bassnett in an interview with Nazry Bahrawi vouches that “the primary duty of the translator is to create a text in the target language that can be appreciated by readers and at the same time demonstrates respect for the source. But how to interpret respect is an interesting question. I do not see that a translator has to follow an original slavishly. Indeed, I believe that it is the duty of the translator to rewrite and to recontextualise whatever it is that he or she is rendering.” The challenge is to reconcile the complex dynamics involved in translation through a delicate balance required between fidelity to the original language and the stubbornness of the target language. It is the elan in negotiating that precise synapse that decides whether the creative act of translation has been successful. The endeavour becomes exceptionally onerous when there is an available, celebrated, Nobel-acclaimed – no less – translation by the author of the source text. And that is the task that Sohini Sen courts in her new *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*.

Even though Sen claims in the foreword that she 're-discovered *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*' without any academic pursuit in mind, in her role as the translator, Sen seems to be cognizant of the issues in literary translation. Her translation is unapologetic and makes no efforts at all to render the original verses 'palatable' to cater to the tastes of any niche, Western or liberal. This is most obvious in her renditions of particularly the well-known verses. Her translation of "Chitta jethā bhayashunya, uchcha jéthā shir" reads thus:

Where the mind is fearless and the head held high  
Where knowledge is free, the earth  
Not fragmented into tiny walled compounds,  
Where speech gushes forth from the depths of the heart,  
Where streams of labour boundlessly flow  
From all nations all directions to fulfill a thousand dreams –  
Where the vast sands of insignificant rituals  
Have not swallowed the stream of justice,  
Nor fragmented manliness into a hundred bits;  
Where it is you who constantly leads all actions,  
thoughts and joy –  
Strike mercilessly with your own hands, Father  
And awaken Bharat into such a heaven.

These lines are resplendent in their unabashed devotion to the motherland, not vapid, or ambiguous.

To the uninitiated, the translation of literary texts may appear a deceptively innocuous venture. Given that translation is transactional between texts and cultures, the mediation is invariably political. Tagore's own translation of the *Gitanjali* is sufficiently problematised by Orientalism. The Yeats who lauded the translations and edited and compiled them would go on to opine later that Tagore wrote 'too much' of God. In May 1935, Yeats wrote to Rothenstein, "Damn Tagore. We got out three good books, Sturge Moore and I, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian can know English" (Wade 834-835). Whether it was indeed "wise imperialism" on the part of Yeats or not, Tagore seems to have accepted the "patronizing yet promotional" fêting from the West (Boehmer 224). Therefore, it is inevitable that his own translation was not unaffected by the expectations and the composition of his circle of Christian, Western admirers. Tagore's original Bangla poems, truncated in his own translations – like the ideas, are now



presented in their complete form in this rendition. It is in this context that newer, decolonial translations of the Bangla magnum opus such as that of Sen need to be read.

The merit of *A Drop of Golden Sun* does not lie only in its academic value but also in its aesthetic of ease. Verse 81 reads thus:

At the heart of all beings  
Hidden, in some leisurely hour  
You nudge the seed to sprout,  
Tinge buds with the hues of blossoming,  
Turn the flower to a honeyed fruit  
Pregnant with seed. Numbed by sleep  
I idled on the bed, exhausted  
Thinking all work was left undone.

The lines' lyrical quality and the musicality in word selection testify to Sen's superior craft. Each verse is an exquisite poem in itself, positioning her more as a co-creator than a translator. Tava ravi kar āsé kar bārāyiyā becomes "Your sunbeam stretches out its arm" and "Niyé jāye bahi mégh-āvarankhāni,/ Nayanér jalé rachita vyākul vāni/ Khachita lalita geeté" alchemise into

I know that it carries my veil of clouds,  
Woven from tears and words of longing  
That create a haunting song.

In praxis, what Sen's translation, or re-presentations as she calls it, seems to establish is that the true touchstone of translation consists in whether the successful translatability of *Dhvoani* and *Sthayibhava* has been made possible.

Sen's translation is a testament to her close relationship between the theory and the practice of translation alongside her linguistic prowess, and deep appreciation for the source material. It is a must-read for those seeking to experience the poetic brilliance of *Gitanjali* in a new, accessible light. In the style of blank verse and evolved English, this translation aims to resonate more with the contemporary youth, emphasising the enduring relevance of its thoughts even as language metamorphoses. *A Drop of Golden Sun* deserves extensive and wide-ranging readership: from academics, especially from the fortes of translation studies, decoloniality, and Indian aesthetics to those who wholeheartedly take succour in poetry without prejudices. In addition, as an academic, I believe this work merits a place within the realms of Translation Studies, Indian Aesthetics and English Literature.

## References

- Bahrawi, Nazry. "Theorising Translation with Susan Bassnett." *Asymptote*, [www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-susan-bassnett](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-susan-bassnett).
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915: Networks of British Empire*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- Sen, Sohini. *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*. Penprints Publication, 2023.
- Wade, Allan, editor. *The Letters of W.B. Yeats [1887-1939]*. R. Hart-Davis, 1954.

## Reviewer's Details:

Currently pursuing her post-doctoral stint at CISTS, IIT Bombay, Dr Lalitha Sarma was formerly an Assistant Professor of English with multiple organisations including the INA and SSSIHL. Her doctoral thesis investigated the nature and locus of the feminine as represented in the aesthetic universe of the Shakespearean oeuvre. She also supervised four doctoral projects on themes of choice, consent, and complicity in gender studies. Having had traditional training in Vedanta since her childhood, Dr Sarma is an avid researcher and storyteller with a deep admiration of timeless Indian wisdom. Her current research is around Indian epistemes in pedagogy and research methodology as well as culture studies and decoloniality.