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From the Editor’s Desk

In his Dream of the Earth (1988) Thomas Berry, cultural historian and ‘geologist”, famously observed: “Our challenge is to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. It is to transcend not only national limitations, but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species. This brings about a completely new sense of reality and value.” Berry’s vision has been endorsed by the post-theory academy, evident from the way terms like ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘species being’, and ‘planetary humanism’ have gained considerable academic currency. Contemporary Literary Studies is focusing its attention on evolving a critical praxis, wherein this new sense of being human will be continuously explored through an ethical-rational critique of the societies of the present — a necessary precondition for creating a posthuman world that approximates Berry’s “community of all living species”. The discipline has dedicated itself to the arduous task of describing the complex processes that are continuously shaping the construct called human society, and identifying the tendencies of the present that suggest the shape of the future. Literary Studies aims to achieve this Promethean task by interpreting a variety of texts — the self and life narratives from the centre and the periphery, multitudinous tales of joy and sorrow of life in the here and now, the fantastic/futuristic Utopian/Dystopic narratives projecting alternative realities…. Literary Studies approaches these texts, armed with the belief that these narratives are both sources of knowledge/wisdom, and socio-cultural ensemble for critical scrutiny. Alteritas: EFL-U Journal of Literary Inquiry, an international online journal, is a modest attempt to join the current debate within the Literary Studies community.
The first issue of the journal deals with some of the key issues the academic community is currently spending its critical energies on: interdisciplinarity, and comparatist focus in new humanities, bio-ethics, the shape of the posthuman future, the malaise of othering that plagues even initiatives aimed at a progressive view of difference, locating the canonical text and the culture it constructs/reflects ‘elsewhere’, acts of remembering dislocation in the aftermath of a traumatic event that subvert the ‘received view’ on the experience of the dislocated folk, and fictionalized remembering as an act of re-membering the adult subjecthood en route to reclaiming traumatic childhood experience.

The first essay of this volume, “Krishna takes Enlisted Against the Nazis and the Japanese: The Reception of Bagvad Gita in T.S. Eliot and Robert J. Oppenheimer” is Dorothy Figueira’s analysis of the struggle of the two seminal minds of the twentieth century to find a way to reconcile human agency in a war-torn world where agency inevitably involved causing or contributing to death and destruction, with the ethical diktat that Emmanuel Levinas sees as central to human civilization: “Thou Shalt Not Kill”. Gitaupadesh, where human agency/action, and total surrender to the will of the Other, the polar opposites in mainstream Western thought, emerge as one and the same through the resonance of ‘karma’, provided the clarity the two thinkers where desperately searching for. To Figueira, the cross-cultural illuminations of the Gita suggests the importance of a genuine comparative focus in literary studies within the new humanities.

In the next essay, “What’s the Point in Caring? Bioethical Concerns in Roald Dahl’s Short Stories”, Snigdha Nagar explores the way Roald Dahl exposes the limits of technological rationality. Making the best use of the potential of the fictional narrative to re-present reality so as to shock the audience into questioning socio-contemporary cultural practices, Dahl compels
his audience to realize the need for balancing scientific inquiry with ethical thought. Dahl’s critique of the one-sided views on human life, Snigdha seems to imply, effectively complements Herbert Marcuse’s theses on technological rationalism.

In her essay “Towards a Posthuman Future: Androgyny, Transhumanism and Culture”, Laxmi Pillai argues that the posthumanist world is a configuration conducive to ideologies that contain the germ of inclusiveness. She views feminism and transhumanism, with their openness to acknowledging their Other—patriarchy and anthropocentrism, an openness she considers the first major step towards a synthesis of these apparently irreconcilable positions, as progressive ideologies with a potential to inaugurate a posthuman world.

“Of Transgender Bodies that Matter: Queering the Media Narratives in Kerala”, the third essay in this volume, Anu Kuriakose argues that the media narratives of the transgender often end up mainstreaming them, by constructing their transgender identity along the familiar lines of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Despite their best intentions to help the transgenders emerge from the margins of the society, Anu Kuriakose claims, media representations of the community end up representing them as yet another, if somewhat intriguing, version of the same.

The next essay titled, “Re-interpreting the Bard, From Kathakali to Kathaprasangam: Cultural Revisionings, Orality, and Theories of Spectatorship” challenges the universality of the Shakespeare appeal, and attempts to establish that the works of the myriad-minded bard are an interesting overlay of myriad story-telling and performative traditions, and the cultures they shape/reflect.

In “Marji in Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis: An Un-childlike Child and the Interpretative Fictionalizing by the Child”, the next essay, Rahul Kamble outlines Marjane Satrapi’s unique narrative strategies that give her child-protagonist voice, a feat that eludes most writers of
children’s fiction. He critiques the facile recreation of the child hero in the adult author’s own image, and the dull and dour homilies that are paraded in the name of children’s fiction, which he sees as instances of inauthenticity, and artistic failure.

“Reminiscence vis-à-vis Reticence: Interpretive Conflict in the Oral Narratives of 1947 Partition Refugees in Kolkata”, the final essay in the volume, takes a re-look at Partition narratives, by focusing on victim interview, an instance of oral history. Sumallya Mukhopadhyay claims to have unearthed two interesting patterns in the interviews she has had with the victims: their reticence over certain areas of experience in their erstwhile home, which result in the events being depicted in an entirely new light, and the reversal of the traditional gender roles in the act of speaking for the family.

I do hope the first issue of Alteritas will mark the inauguration of a thousand one nights of interpretive encounters, interactions that will enrich scholars in the field, and contribute to their efforts to forge critical-ethical consciousness in their societies at large.
Krishna Takes Enlisted Against the Nazis and the Japanese:
The Reception of the Bhagavad Gita in T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer

Dorothy M. Figueira

Abstract: This essay explores the role played by the Bagvad Gita, the emblematic Sanskrit text, in the search for answers to some of the daunting ethical questions haunting the Western civilization during the Second World War. Particularly, it will look at the references to the Gita in some of the major discourses on war to see whether they function as mere decoration or they are organically incorporated in the works where they are cited. It will focus on the reception of the Gita in the 1940 by T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer, to see if the Gita played any significant role in shaping the response of the two thinkers to the war against the Nazis and fascist forces. Separating the use of texts like the Gita for their supposedly exotic idiom of thought and expression from the organic incorporation of these texts as part of the efforts to understand the human condition is crucial to genuine literary inquiry.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, Robert Oppenheimer, Bagavad Gita, Second World War

The saint may renounce action, but the soldier, the citizen, the practical man generally – they should renounce, not action but its fruits. It is wrong for them to be idle, it is equally wrong to desire a reward for industry. It is wrong to shirk destroying civilization and one’s kindred and friends, and equally wrong to hope for dominion afterwards. When all such hopes and desires are dead, fear dies also, and freed from all attachments the “dweller in the body” will remain calm while the body performs its daily duty, and will be unrestrained by sin, as is the lotus leaf by the water of the tank.

E.M. Forster, “Hymn before Action”

Introduction

Indian studies scholars have claimed that the Western reception of the Bhagavad Gita contributed to the refusal to take India seriously (Halbfass, Hulin, Droit). Indeed the Hindu “Song of the Lord” has a varied and controversial life in the West. It was the first Sanskrit text translated (into English) and published by Charles Wilkins in 1785. It spawned commentaries by

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Victor Cousin, A.W. Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel. Embraced in the West as the Bible of Hinduism, it influenced Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In a previous publication, I examined the reception of the *Gita* and showed how the European search for models in an Indian exotic ultimately collided with the vision of fatalism (Figueira, The Exotic). In this essay, I will expand this investigation to examine the readings of this emblematic Sanskrit text during the Second World War. Particularly, I will look at whether references to the *Gita* function as decoration or whether they appear as organically incorporated in the works where they are cited. I will focus on the reception of the *Gita* in the 1940 by T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

**T.S. Eliot**

T.S. Eliot (1999-1965) shared Emerson’s admiration for the Gita, claiming it was in his experience the next greatest philosophical poem after the *Divine Comedy*.\(^2\) Eliot also shared Whitman’s and Emerson’s habit of sprinkling his poetry with words (Figueira, BG In American Poetry and Opera). His most famous appropriation of Sanskrit terminology is found in The Waste Land (1922) which concludes with the customary formal closure found in all Upanishads: “*shantih, shantih, shantih.*”\(^3\) But, earlier in the same poem, in Section V, “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot teases his readers with other Sanskrit words and sounds. He repeats the rumblings of the thunder (*Da, Da, Da*) that he borrows from the Hindu god Prajapati and admits in another note that he had requisitioned the injunction from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 5.1: “*Datta, Davadhvam, Damyata.*”\(^4\) In these instances, one can get the sense that Eliot used Sanskrit terms much in the same ornamental manner as he quoted from Dante or Rimbaud in their original

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\(^3\)“Peace, Peace, Peace” in line 43 that Eliot explains in a note.

\(^4\) See line 432, translated from the Sanskrit as “Give, Sympathize, Control.” Eliot directs his reader to the translation of the Upanishads by Deussen (Sechzig Upanishads des Veda 1898:489).
languages. Is it a form of cultural appropriation, especially since after Eliot has the Thunder God speak Sanskrit, he then has his words interpreted by Western voices (Brooker and Bentley 191)? Can we say that Eliot used Sanskrit terminology as a means of rejecting the possibility of interpretation (Brooker and Bentley 200), in much the same way as Hegel did (Figueira, The Exotic 63-91)? Or was he doing something quite different? Were evocations of India as serious as readers of Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, have taken them to be even though their knowledge and involvement with India was at times superficial (Figueira, BG In American Poetry and Opera)? In contrast to the Transcendentalists’ understanding of India, Eliot was far more informed. Yet, critics do not take his involvement with India as readers of the Transcendentalists have viewed the Concord contingent’s reception of Indian thought. Eliot’s critics viewed his use of Indian thought as fragmentary or, in describing it, they indulge in their own exoticism, as when Cleanth Brooks notes that The Waste Land contains “the oldest and most poetical truth of the race” (Unger 343). Eliot’s use of Indian thought is also interpreted in simplistic psychological terms as when Eliot’s call for asceticism is viewed as an attempt to check his “drive of desire” (Unger 336). For the most part, Eliot’s critics brush his Indian references aside as accidents, errors, inconsistencies that crept into his work. This scholarship is also negative and generally dismissive (Gross 213) of the Indian elements Eliot incorporated in his work. Conrad Aiken saw it as evidence of Eliot’s overall “decadence” (Perl and Tuck 129, n. 6). Helen Gardner, who disliked Eliot’s Christianity (Gardner), sees the adding of Krishna as an error that destroys the harmony of the poem. William Blisset sees the Four Quartets as a Christian exposition, merely mixed with incompatible non-Christian themes. Philip

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5 This is not due to lack of materials available. Major texts were in print and available to them either through the Harvard collections or Thoreau’s library of some thirty seminal works given to him by his friend Cholmedeloy.

Wheelwright dismisses Eliot’s use of Indian philosophy to a synthesis of Hindu ideas and Heraclitus. H. H. Wagoner agrees with Gardner, especially when she sees the Gita as exhibiting an element of “quietism” that is also found in Christian thought. The problem that this critic does not grasp, is that such quietism is nowhere present in the Gita, but such an ill-informed and erroneous understanding of Hinduism does not appear to be of any consequence to these English literature critics/professors who feel they can pontificate on matters they know nothing about (McCarthy 34).

What I find so interesting here, from the perspective of a comparatist, is not that these critics should be opinionated but rather that they feel justified in discussing Hinduism in such an uninformed manner. Let me say something here that might strike some readers as outrageous, but is something I have heard voiced also by scholars in other fields in the humanities. It is the following: many English literature professors suffer from a tendency, all too prevalent in their discipline, of thinking that one is an expert on everything, because one has studied English literature, considered the acme of humanistic training. These same English literature professors who may view Comparative Literature scholars as superficial have no problem viewing themselves as omniscient. Moreover, their expertise in pontificating on other fields does not take the form of a dialogue with other experts, i.e. talking sociology with sociologists, as is the aspiration of Comparative Literature, but rather understanding sociology enough to impress another English literature scholar. We see this same disciplinary arrogance when English literature scholars approach the foreign, as in the criticism of the Indian influence on T.S. Eliot. I was quite surprised about all the things said about India and Eliot. Even a very astute scholar

7 Certainly, the theme of impermanence can be attributed to Heraclitus, but Eliot is actually referencing Krishna and Arjuna here, suggesting that he was talking about India and not Greece.
8 For more on critics, Vimala Rao (1981).
9 For an early summary of this criticism, see McCarthy 1952.
such as Balachandra Rajan, who also happens to be of Indian origin, addresses Eliot’s use of Indian thought as a “maze of Oriental metaphysics” that was “uncomfortably sinuous.” Did Eliot use Indian thought seriously, and was his cultural appropriation merely ornamental, as some critics would have us believe?

Beginning in 1911, after his return from the Sorbonne, Eliot studied Sanskrit (Indic philology) for two years with Charles Rockwell Lanman (Eliot, After Strange 43-44, cited in Rao, TSE &BG 572). He also read Indian philosophy under James Houghton Woods who was writing his Yoga System of Patanjali at the time (1914) (Howarth 201). Eliot abandoned the study of Sanskrit in the Spring of 1913. In lectures Eliot much later presented in Virginia, he described these studies laconically. As Helen Gardner would later parody, Eliot confessed:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali’s metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. (Eliot, After Strange 43-44, cited in Rao, TSE &BG 572)

Eliot went on to clarify that he concluded at the time that he would have to forget thinking and feeling as an American or a European in order to pursue these studies, something he did not care to do. However, before abandoning his Indic studies, Eliot translated and annotated the Gita.

10 Lanman himself had studied Sanskrit at Yale with William Dwight Whitney, who himself had studied in Tübingen under the renowned Vedic scholar Rudolf Roth. The President of Harvard, Charles Eliot’s, who happened to be T.S. Eliot’s cousin, had brought Lanman to Harvard where he inaugurated the Harvard Oriental Series, and wrote the Sanskrit Reader, still in use today.

11 Helen Gardner would later parody the quote claiming that Eliot’s poem left her as mystified as he had been by his studies of Patanjali.

12 Upon leaving Indian philosophy he bought a copy of F.H. Bradley’s Appearance and Reality at the Harvard Coop (cited Howarth 1964:206).

13 He had studied Indic Philology 1A and 1B (elementary Sanskrit) with Lanman in his first year. Then in 1912-13, he did Indic Philology 4 and 5 (Pali) with Lanman. He also did Indic Philology 9 (Philosophical Sanskrit) with James Woods and read the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. In short, one third of his graduate classes at Harvard dealt with
For him, the Gita was different from philosophy. It addressed more worldly concerns. As Eliot observed in a 1931 essay on Pascal, even the most exalted mystics must return to the world and use reason to employ the result of their experience in daily life. Commenting on the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Eliot felt that he was not compelled to take sides, since he did not have sufficient knowledge.

Partnerships should be held with reservation, humility and misgiving. That balance of mind which as few highly-civilized individuals, such as Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, can maintain in action, is difficult for most of us even as observers.¹⁴

Well before World War II, the Gita had informed Eliot’s thoughts regarding action and conflict.

The Gita’s theme of detachment, desirelessness and love are central to the Four Quartets, Eliot’s last poetic work written between 1936-42. Eliot saw time and mystical experience as central themes in the work and understood them in light of Indian thought. In a radio talk in 1946 on “The Unity of European Culture,” Eliot noted:

Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility. (cited in Howarth 201)

This sensibility is best seen in the theme of detachment that pervades the Four Quartets. In “Little Gidding”, he writes:

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to Self and to things and for persons, detachment
From self and from things, from persons; detachment
From self and from things and, growing
Between them, indifference
Which resemble the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives – unflowering between
The live and the dead nettle. (Eliot, FQ 195)

In the last section of the second quartet, “East Coker”, we learn that: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (Eliot, Complete Poems 182). This message nicely parallels the Gita 2.47, where Krishna first explains detached action.

Another key Indian theme, suffering, animates the second movement of the third quartet, “Dry Salvages”:
Where is there an end of it, the Soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach... (Eliot, Complete Poems 185)

Eliot’s adoption of a Hindu understanding of suffering becomes quite clear, in the third section of “Dry Salvages” where he features the Gita’s battle scene. Here Krishna justifies the killing of his kin to Arjuna who shrinks from battle. Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfil his dharma and fulfil
his appointed role in the cosmic drama. Eliot suggests that one cannot comprehend the Lord’s will:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant –

Among other things – or one way of putting the same thing:

That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray. . . (Eliot, Complete Poems 187).

He then reiterates the central teaching of the *Gītā* - that one should act without being concerned with the fruits of one’s actions: “And do not think of the fruit of action” (Eliot, Complete Poems 188).

The Krishna and Arjuna found in the middle movement of “Dry Salvages” stand for the resolute pursuit of life. They warn that whatever we are doing at this moment is what we are destined to do in eternity. Eliot seems to ask us to consider whether we are doing what we would like to be doing in eternity and if not, amend ourselves (Howarth 205). It is significant that Eliot does not end his poem by saying “Fare well” but rather “Fare forward, voyager.”

So Krishna, as he admonished Arjuna

On the field of battle.

Not fare well,

But fare forward, voyagers. (Eliot, Complete Poems 188)

These sentiments resonate with what Krishna admonishes Arjuna to do:

Antakale sa mameva smaramuktva kalevaram/

Yah prayati sa madbhavam yati nastyatra samskaya
Who at the time of death thinks of me alone, leaves the body and goes forth, he reaches My Being; there is no death. (Bhagavad Gita 8.5)

The voyagers can be saved if they heed the advice of Krishna and only perform action without thoughts of the Self. In his advice, Eliot is essentially paraphrasing the above quote. One can die at any moment (not the immanent death facing Arjuna), so one should be intent on the highest sphere of being and thus fructify the lives of others. Of the various themes in the Gita, Eliot was not focusing on the soul as unborn, eternal, and everlasting. He was not fixating on the world as illusion. What he took from the Gita was its concept of disinterested action, the karma yoga – it is Arjuna’s duty (dharma) to fight. But Eliot completes Krishna’s words with an important modification – whatever one dwells on, one attains upon death (i.e. is fructified in the next life if one is reborn). Here, Eliot expresses the central truth of the Gita 8.6-7

Yam yam vapt smaran bhavam tyajatyante kalevaram
Tam tam evaiti kaunteya suede tadbhavabhavatih/
Tasmat sarveshu kaleshu mam anusmara yudhya ca
Mayyarpitamanobuddhir mam evaishyayyasamshayam

On whatever Being one is thinking at the end when one leaves the body,
That being alone, O son of Kunti, one reaches when one constantly dwells on that Being
Therefore, at all times, meditate on Me and fight with mind and reason fixed on Me.
You shall doubtless come to Me.  

Philip Wheelwright points out the almost literal translation of the Gita 8.8 (“Eliot’s Philosophical Themes “in Rajan 1947: 103-05, cited in McCarthy 1952:37

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But contrary to the Gita’s injunction that disinterested action leads to one’s salvation (understood in the Hindu context as the release from rebirth), Eliot speaks of the fructification in the lives of others.

At the moment which is not action or inaction

You can receive this: “of whatever sphere of being

The mind of a man may be intent

At the time of death” – that is the one action

(And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others. (“Dry Salvages, lines 155-160)

Eliot writes near the end of “Dry Salvages”:

And right action is freedom

From past and future also (Eliot, Complete Poems 190)

Eliot is questioning what concerns and what paths “most of us,” who like Arjuna are caught up in action (Fowler 414), will follow. Like the Gita, Eliot is encouraging detachment, as in the third section of “Little Gidding”:

Not less of love but expanding

Of love beyond desire, and so liberation

From the future as well as the past. (Eliot, Complete Poems 193)

Hence, we are advised to “fare forward” rather than “fare well.” We are also enjoined to “be still and wail without hope.”

To reach Little Gidding, the place embodying the state of the liberated soul, described in the quartet named after that destination:
You would have to put off/ Sense and notion (Eliot, Complete Poems 192) . . . because in order to possess what you do not possess/ You must go by way of dispossession. (Eliot, Complete Poems 181).

Sense and notion can be understood here as Eliot’s translation of the Gita’s explication of Samkhya philosophy. Of course, one also finds there is self-denial and deprivation in Christian mysticism also, but it was the particular expression of the concepts found in the Gita’s code of moral conduct that Eliot found attractive.

Ardor, selflessness and self-surrender appear in the third section of “Little Gidding”, where there are numerous parallels to the Gita’s description of attachment to the self and others, detachment from the self and others, and indifference. The way of action is announced in the first section of “Little Gidding” and the rest of this quartet reintroduces concerns found in the preceding quartets and highlights their particular significance for the tranquil, the attached, and the non-attached voyager. The second and third sections of “Little Gidding” suggests how attached and non-attached beings may be represented and evaluated. Just as fire, water, earth, and air can never be free of action, so too are beings limited by attachment. In the fourth and final section, attraction is defined as the desire for an object. “Higher attraction” consists of the “drawing of this Love” for the unmoving source of unending action from which we need to be freed. It is only through an awareness of moments of intersecting life and death that the traveler with the “drawing of this Love” (that is love unattached to endings and beginnings) becomes free and can “fare forward.”

Indian influences are not limited to The Waste Land and the Four Quartets; they appear elsewhere in Eliot’s work. In 1943. Eliot was commissioned to write a poem for Queen Mary’s
Book for India. Its contribution, “To Indians Who Died in Africa”, was intended, as were all the contributions to the volume, to benefit the war effort. Its role in this anthology is quite similar to that of the Gita in the Mahabharata – both serve as a call to battle. Just as Arjuna is instructed to lead the Pandavas into the Great War, so too does Eliot encourage Indians to fight in the Second World War as they had done in the First World War (Figueira, Subaltern can Speak).

Just as Krishna in of the Bhagavat Gita urged Arjuna to pursue activity without attachment to the fruits of action, here too Eliot sends the same message and draws the parallel between the cosmic battle of Kurukshetra depicted in the Gita and Indians fighting in both World Wars for England. It is to be noted that at the time Eliot composed this poem, World War II had already taken a considerable toll on the India combatants who had been fighting for their imperial masters without much to gain. Moreover, they were in combat without the British having even consulted the Indian National Congress before declaring war on their behalf. Also, in the First World War, Britain had not bothered to poll Indian opinion. Since, in the intervening years, the English had made and broken quite a number of promises and given that the independence movement was in full swing, there were fewer Indian subjects willing to support the Second World War in the hopes of gaining concessions from the British this time around (Figueira, Subaltern can Speak 90). Eliot’s poem is best understood in this context and in light of the Indian combatants’ involvement in both World Wars.

In the First World War, the role of the Indian Army was not negligible. By the time the Armistice was signed, India had provided 1,270,000 soldiers to the war effort of which 827,000

17 “Dry Salvages” and “To Indians who Died in Africa” were written within a year of each other. The poem was solicited by the editor Cornelia Sorabji for the war effort (Chandan 2007:54).
were combatants. Indians comprised one-tenth of the Empire’s manpower. The Indian Army in the First World War, as in the Second, was comprised mostly of Punjabi, Muslims and Sikhs (Omissi 2). The recruits mostly stemmed from warrior castes, so Eliot’s evocation of the Mahabharata War to describe the modern Indian soldier is apt.

Eliot realistically portrays the morale and bravery that the Indian soldiers exhibited. As sepoy letters from the First World War attest, they were dedicated to their duty as soldiers. Unlike British soldier-poets such as Rupert Brooke who focused on the glory of battle, or Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen who wallowed in the horror of their impending deaths, the Indian soldiers, as we can gather from their testimonies attempted to make religious or philosophical sense out of the war (Figueira, Subaltern can Speak 97-100). Whether professional soldiers or hapless villagers conscripted into the Indian Army, the sepoys of the First World War exhibited in the letters they left behind a certain detachment and sang-froid in the face of destruction. Moreover, they rejected the certainty regarding battle, glory and hallowed dust – the sentimentality and lies of wartime propaganda. Even more than the British poet-soldiers, the Indian sepoys of the First World War offered a convincing repudiation of the lies of old men, who led them into the trenches of the Ypres Salient (Figueira, Subaltern can Speak 101). Eliot wonderfully evoked the worldview of such soldiers when he writes in “East Coker” (II, 76-8):

Had they deceived us,

Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,

Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit.

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18 The British avoided recruiting from the educated classes whom they believed had been tainted by radical politics.
In “To the Indians Who Died in Africa,” Eliot juxtaposes the Indian soldiers fighting in Africa during the Second World War\textsuperscript{19} to Arjuna. In both war zones, the Indian soldiers fulfil the duty of their caste (as warriors) to perform without attachment to the fruits of action. In the poem, Eliot presents the dilemma of the Indian as it is presented in the Gita; the goal of individual warrior is salvation as expressed specifically in the Gita’s emphasis on action (3.5; 3.9).

Eliot’s poem contains four stanzas. The first three have five lines, the last consists of seven. The first two stanzas present a picture of a happy old warrior whose destination should consist of returning home to his wife’s cooking, sitting by his fire, and watching his grandson play. He will relate his war stories:

A man’s destination is his own village,
His own fire, and his wife’s cooking;
To sit in front of his own door at sunset
And see his grandson and his neighbour’s grandson
Play in the dust together.

Scarred but secure, he has many narratives
To repeat at the hour of conversation
(The warm or the cool hour, according to the climate).

\textsuperscript{19} The 2 million Indians who enlisted to fight during the Second World War comprised the biggest volunteer army that ever existed (see Geoffrey Moorhouse, \textit{India Britannica}. London: Harvill, 1983, pp. 242-3, cited in Chandan 58) The fourth, fifth and tenth divisions fought in North Africa between 1939-43, The fourth and fifth divisions fought in East Africa between 1940-41. The fourth division smashed the Italians at Sidi Barrani and took the entire Italian army prisoner and they led the conquest of Italian East Africa and the liberation of Abyssinia (Chandan 2007: 59).
The last two stanzas announce that the land does not belong to anyone. Two people, two countries, one from the Punjab, the land of five rivers and the other from the Midlands in England can share the same memories (Rao, TSE and BG574-5):

Of foreign men, who fought in foreign places,
Foreign to each other
A man’s destination is not his destiny.
Every country is home to one man
And exile to another. When a man dies bravely
At one with his destiny, that soil is his.
Let his village remember
This was not your land, or ours: but a village in the Midlands
Another in the Five Rivers, may have the same memories. Let those who go home tell the same story of you: Of action with a common purpose, action
None the less fruitful if neither you nor I
Know, until the judgment after death,
What is the fruit of action.

In 1943, the repetition of the term “foreign” in “foreign men” could not but evoke the issue of foreign rule in opposition to the self-rule (swadeshi) that the Indians were militating for with the Quit India Movement. In response to such an association, Eliot asserts that the land was “not your land, or ours.” The poem then moves from the material to the spiritual. In the beginning, a man is attached to “his own fire, his own village, his wife’s cooking, his grandson.” However, by the third stanza we find him detached from his homeland. He belongs where he
dies bravely. The final stanza emphasizes the spiritual and the eternal elements. There is the exhortation to pursue action without regard to its fruits, in the manner of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna. As in the Gita, the poem speaks in direct address.

In addition to the Four Quartets and “To the Indians Who Died in Africa,” the Gita’s teaching of love and non-attachment also appears in Eliot’s dramatic works. In The Cocktail Party, Eliot presents a vision of life as a matter of choice similar to the proper attitude with which the Gita teaches that one must perform action (Rao, Cocktail Party and BG 195). Reilly, the psychiatrist, tells Edward, Lavinia and Celia that they all need to understand the nature of their love (self, selfish and lovelessness). He also tells Celia that her way is that of knowledge. When Celia asks Reilly to clarify what her duty is, he responds that neither way is better, The two paths presented in the Gita, that of karma and jnana, are similar to the two paths that Reilly presents to Celia. Moreover, he explains how the two paths to attain salvation are suitable to individuals according to their temperaments, similar to the Gita’s teaching regarding the gunas, already suggested in “Little Gidding.” Reilly instructs his “patients” that their duties must also conform to their position in life and with the proper attitude. Reilly points out to Edward and Lavinia that they are householders and that life is as important as that of the ascetic. In other

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20 The Indian dead of the First World War are mourned in cemeteries throughout Belgium and France, where they were cremated and buried with full religious respect and honour. On these graves, the sepoy’s name, number, name of regiment and date of death are duly noted in English. The largest and most sumptuous memorial to the Indian fallen is found at Neuve Chapelle, the site of one of their more significant engagements. The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle is a particularly impressive lieu de memoire. Designed in the Indo-Saracen style, an enclosure with a 15-meter pillar resembling the pillar of Asoka surmounted with a lotu capital, the star of India, and the imperial crown. On either side of the column are two carved tigers, guarding this temple to the dead. On the pillar itself are the written words: GOD IS ONE HIS IS THE VICTORY. This lofty sentiment is accompanied by roughly equivalent citations from the Koran written in Arabic script, from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib written in Gurmukhi (IK ONKAR SRI WAHEGURU JI KI FATEH) and finally from the Bhagavad Gita in Devanagari script (OM BHAGAVATE NAMAH). The column and tigers are supported by a podium on which is carved ‘INDIA 1914-19’.

This monument is so spectacular; it is only surpassed by the ossuary at Verdun.

21 Celia needs to become more universal in her love, Edward needs to change his self-love into selfless love for Lavinia and Lavinia needs to transform her lovelessness to become responsible for Edward (Rao 1981:196).
words, he presents an elaboration of the *varnashramadharma*, as it is found in the Gita. In the end, the Reilly bids farewell to his “patients” with words both for a discriminating pursuit of life as for its renunciation. Here, Eliot has him speak not from the Gita, but using the words of the dying Buddha: “Work out your salvation with diligence.” This refrain is found throughout *The Cocktail Party*. The characters are exhorted at several reprises to “work out” their “salvation with diligence.”

With the exception of this citation of the Buddha’s last words, we would be hard pressed to see a Buddhist turn in Eliot, despite Steven Spender’s comment that Eliot had almost become a Buddhist. These evocations equally show a reliance on the Gita, since in terms of ethics Hinduism and Buddhism share the same belief - that we must become emancipated from desire. Similarly, the theme of impermanence so important to Eliot and expressed in “East Coker” and especially in “Dry Salvages” where he writes: “Fare forward. . .You are not the same people who left that station. Or who will arrive at any terminus. . .” could equally well reflect his appreciation of Buddhist thought. We must remember he studied both religions and philosophies consecutively. Hindu and Buddhist themes (such as *karma*, predestination, illusion, the ability to make the right choice at death) appear elsewhere in Eliot’s plays (Ghosh 1974: 131), such as *The Elder Statesman, Murder in the Cathedral, and The Family Reunion*. In *The Family Reunion*, one character notes:

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22 This is a well-known citation from accounts of the Buddha’s death that Eliot most probably took from his Sanskrit teacher’s third volume edition in the Harvard Oriental Series that he edited, Warren’s *Buddhism in Translation* (1922:109). Eliot also cites Warren’s anthology (still in print today and used in classrooms as source material) in “The Fire Sermon, the third part of “The Wasteland” (Eliot 1969: 308).


24 In 1913-14, Eliot attended Masaharu Anesaki’s class “Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought In Japan” which consisted of the study of Buddhism in Japan and China. Eliot thus showed a desire to study Buddhism outside India; it should be noted that he abandoned Sanskrit after the first year in order to study Pali.
O God, man, the things that are going to happen Have already happened (Eliot, complete
Poems 317, cited in Ghosh 134)

Among the Transcendentalists, we can identify two tendencies operant in their readings
of the Gita – a superficial use of Sanskrit terminology for its evocative potential and a conscious
attempt to cull some religious meaning from this “exotic” text (Figueira Subaltern Can Speak).
Eliot was far more knowledgeable in his appropriation, using the Gita as an inspirational
springboard for his wartime reflections on human and social responsibility. It is not without
significance that Eliot chose to quote Krishna’s command to fight in the middle of World War II.
He was signaling the Gita’s teaching that since the unchanging spirit does not dwell in the mortal
body, one should continue to act and fight on the battlefield without attachment to the world.
What is interesting here is not that Eliot evoked the Gita, this seems to have become almost a
cliché among America’s artists and intellectuals, but the manner in which he appropriated it. He
was telling his readers that they should not be concerned with their own fate, but rather with the
good of mankind. In this sense, Eliot appropriated the Gita in particularly in “Dry Salvages” in
order to Christianize its message and urge his fellow citizens to fight for the greater good of the
nation and humanity. To fight the Nazis in order to preserve civilization as they knew it was at
issue. It was this impulse that drew Eliot to reconnect with Hindu philosophy as he understood it
from his reading and translating the Gita. It was this same impulse that animated the
appropriation of the Gita by Eliot’s fellow American, J. Robert Oppenheimer, at roughly around
the same time.

Oppenheimer

J. Robert Oppenheimer’s (1904-67) admiration for the Gita can partially be understood
within the context of his upbringing. He was born into a rich and cultivated New York Jewish
family. His father had been a textile merchant who immigrated to the States and married a cultivated Midwestern woman who was a painter. Oppenheimer’s mother was attentive to the needs of Robert and his younger brother Frank. Handicapped with a withered hand, she sought to instill in them a certain hardiness. The Oppenheimers did not raise their sons as religious Jews. In fact, from an early age, Robert had been affiliated with Felix Adler’s Society for Ethical Culture of which his father was on the Board of Directors. The Society for Ethical Culture rejected the transcendental aspects of religion and focused on human welfare as a basis of universal faith. It advocated that one was to assume responsibility for the direction of one’s life and destiny. For ten years, Oppenheimer studied at the Ethical Culture School in New York, graduating as its valedictorian. He then moved on to Harvard University, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in three years (1922-5) and first in his class with the highest grade-point average that Harvard had ever recorded. At some point in his studies, he became familiar with ancient Indian literature in English translations.\(^\text{25}\) In fact, I.I. Rabi, who knew him as a young man and later worked on the Manhattan Project with him, remarked in 1929 that he thought Oppenheimer was more interested in the Hindu classics than he had ever been in physics.\(^\text{26}\) He appreciated, in particular, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Smith and Weiner 165). Frank Oppenheimer noted how his brother “was really taken by the charm and the general wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*” but added that he felt he had never got “religiously involved in it.”\(^\text{27}\) It is worth noting that


\(^{27}\) Frank Oppenheimer in the film production Day After Trinity, cited in Hijiya 2000:126.
Oppenheimer listed the Gita along with *The Waste Land* which had just been published,\textsuperscript{28} as one of the ten books that did most to shape his vocational attitude and your philosophy of life. In fact, the Gita gave Oppenheimer a code of belief that he would use throughout his professional life. Its teaching also afforded him a timely rationale to question and ultimately reject his upbringing in Ethical Culture.

In the 1920s, Oppenheimer was conspicuously ambitious. He was also very depressed. John Edsall, a college friend, recalled how Oppenheimer desperately wanted to make a big contribution to science. At Harvard, the distinguished physicist, Percy Bridgeman, had told him that he could not yet consider himself a physicist until he had done original work\textsuperscript{29} and Oppenheimer fully realized how he had missed out on participating in the important breakthroughs in the field by Werner Heisenberg and others that had already taken place. He knew full well that he needed to make his own big discoveries and that, in the field of physics, such discoveries are usually made when one was young. After graduating from Harvard, Oppenheimer went to the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University to continue working in applied physics. This stint in England was a calamitous. In fact, Oppenheimer became suicidal and sought treatment from psychiatrists both in Paris and in London. He was on the verge of a complete breakdown and there is some evidence that he did indeed suffer a psychotic episode at that time (Hijiya 149). Part of his problem was his failure to stand out as the most gifted applied physicist at Cambridge, an ego blow that was all the more upsetting, given his oversized ambition. His youthful training in Ethical Culture installed in him a sense of social burden whose ideal entailed the development of the individual’s ability to change the

\textsuperscript{28} In addition to the Gita and Eliot, he also cited Baudelaire, Bhartrhari, Dante, Flaubert (*Education sentimentale*) Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the works of the German mathematician Riemann and Plato’s *Theaetitus* (Hijiya 2000:130).

\textsuperscript{29} Interview in Weiner 16 July 1975, p. 14 in Oppenheimer Oral Collection MIT, in Hijiya 2000:149
environment and have a beneficent effect upon the world. Ethical Culture focused on the role of privileged and exceptional humans in the making of history.\textsuperscript{30} His friend, I. I. Rabi thought that Ethical Culture had been an immobilizing burden on Oppenheimer (Bird and Sherwin 101). Rabi’s wife, Helen Newmark, who had been a classmate of Oppenheimer at Ethical Culture, commented on his conflict with its philosophy. She felt that it had soured Oppenheimer as a budding intellectual, even if it instilled in him a more profound approach to human relations (Bird and Sherwin 101).

Even so, and despite his psychological crisis and failure to succeed at Cambridge, Oppenheimer moved on to Göttingen where he completed his doctorate under Max Born in 1927. He had resolved the feelings of inadequacy he felt at Cambridge as an applied physicist by finding his bearings as a theoretical physicist in Germany. Upon graduating, he was offered (and accepted) dual posts both at Berkeley, where he would build the Theoretical Physics department, and Cal Tech. It was at this time that, as a young professor of physics, Oppenheimer began to study Sanskrit with Arthur W. Ryder at Berkeley. He wrote to his brother that it was “very easy and quite marvelous” (October 7, 1933 in Smith and Weiner 165). He attended Ryder’s Thursday evening readings of the Gita. Oppenheimer’s letters to his brother express how the Gita’s teaching on detachment and renunciation could serve as viable alternative to Adler’s insistence on constant self-analysis and self-evaluation. Oppenheimer felt that he could replace Adler with Ryder as a more amenable guru. Oppenheimer had come to view his Sanskrit teacher as his moral paragon. “Ryder felt and thought and talked as a Stoic. . .a special subclass of people who have a tragic sense of life” (Thorpe 53). With his study of Hindu religious philosophy,

Oppenheimer was also perhaps adding to his life an element of spirituality that had been lacking in both Ethical Culture and his secular upbringing. It also suited his sense of his own exceptionality.

Oppenheimer’s discovery of Indian philosophy thought and particularly his study of the Gita, would have a tremendous influence on his future endeavors. Once Oppenheimer embraced the ethics he found in the Gita, its notion of duty, and its injunction to renounce the fruits of one’s actions, he could easily reject the burden of personal responsibility that the teaching of Ethical Culture had imposed on him. Oppenheimer preferred the Gita’s laws of karma, destiny, and duty to Ethical Culture’s stress on individual human will. Yet, in its celebration of action and engagement, Oppenheimer could also see the Gita as compatible with what he did appreciate in his Ethical Culture upbringing: its mandate to succeed and produce results. Around this time, he wrote:

I believe that through discipline, though not through discipline alone, we can achieve serenity, and a certain small but precious measure of freedom from the accidents of incarnation. . .and that detachment which preserves the world which it renounces, (Bird and Sherwin 100)

Oppenheimer would henceforth use the Gita as a manual for regulating his life. Since the emotional crisis of 1926 at Cambridge, Oppenheimer had desperately sought equilibrium and the Gita now supplied him with it. Discipline and hard work always had worked for him in the past and with the Gita, he could now raise duty to a philosophy of life.

The Gita gave Oppenheimer a “feeling for the place of ethics’ and an understanding of vocation. It taught him that “any man who does a hard thing well is automatically respectable and worthy of respect” (Thorpe 53). It is clear that Oppenheimer had found in the Gita and the
behavior he saw embodied in his teacher Ryder an ascetic ethos on which to model his own self-fashioning. In a letter to his brother, Oppenheimer wrote:

I think that all things which evoke discipline: study and our duties to men and to the commonwealth, and war, and personal hardship, and even the need for subsistence, ought to be greeted by us with profound gratitude; for only through them can we attain to the least detachment; and only so can we know peace (cited in Bird and Sherwin 100).

Oppenheimer was seeking detachment from the world, yet he was still quite an intellectual snob who desired worldly fame and scientific glory. Like so many of the other exoticist Schwärmer, Oppenheimer was looking for an alibi in India, an elsewhere to inhabit to make himself more interesting to himself and others (Figueira, The Exotic). He was also looking for some peace of mind. The Gita’s concept of dharma meshed with Oppenheimer’s interest in ascetic discipline and his understanding of science as a vocation. What is interesting is the manner in which he used the language of the Gita to express his own variation on the “Protestant ethic” (Thorpe 53) that he had absorbed earlier from his training in Ethical Culture.

Oppenheimer felt that the Gita was “the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue.” He would always keep a copy on the bookshelf closest to his desk and had the habit of giving out translations as gifts (Royal 64). He carried a copy of the Gita in his pocket for casual consultation during his work at Los Alamos. Ryder had written in the introduction to his Gita translation (1929) about the inspiration that had been found in this text by “uncounted millions” for the road to salvation. It is clear that this was the case for his student who found in it a new ethics: the single-minded performance of personal duty. No longer focusing on Ethical Culture’ humanitarianism and its quest for greatness (fruits of action) Oppenheimer now honed in on the Gita’s teaching regarding the execution of duty without care for the fruits of one’s
actions. If the Gita did not free Oppenheimer from his overweening ambition for distinction, it at least soothed his frustrations at not achieving greatness for some significant discovery. Although he was a man very much enmeshed in creature comforts, wealth, a privileged lifestyle, Oppenheimer wrote in a letter to his brother (March 12, 1932) how he wanted very much to free himself from the desire of things of the world (Smith and Weiner 155). The ethic he discovered in the Gita would guide him in the decade he taught in California but it would be put to the test subsequently.

In 1942, despite lack of seniority, the lack of any administrative qualifications or experience, with considerable promise yet no great discoveries under his belt (i.e. no Nobel Prize), Oppenheimer was appointed Director of the laboratory for the Manhattan Project. He had greatly impressed General Leslie Groves, the head of the bomb project, with organizational ideas he had expressed at a conference of assembled scientists in the planning stages for the project. He had also showed an initial willingness to allow the project to be run by the military and this willingness (or cluelessness) had also impressed Groves,\(^{31}\) Oppenheimer’s appointment surprised many. It was not only his relative lack of qualifications for the job,\(^ {32}\) but his political affiliation that triggered the response to his appointment. Through a former fiancée, his wife and his brother, Oppenheimer had been active in leftist politics. There was some speculation that he had been a Communist Party member. The 30s and 40s were not yet the time of the Red Scare of the 50s, nevertheless Oppenheimer had in his social and familial milieu more involvement in and had offered financial support for Leftist causes than customary even in his cultural and

\(^{31}\) It was only when physicists refused to join the project if it was to be militarily run, out of concern that military bureaucracy would impede their efforts – a legitimate fear of men who had more political acumen and/or experience of the military, that Oppenheimer backed out of this initial stipulation.

\(^{32}\) It should be noted that many other scientists were already involved in running other major laboratories for the war effort.
professional milieu. It might certainly have been deemed excessive for an appointment to such a highly sensitive position. Nevertheless, he was appointed to this task and became responsible for coordinating the work of thousands of men and women. Charged with and deciding upon a location for the operation, he chose Los Alamos as its headquarters, an area he knew from summers spent there camping and horseback riding with his brother. He went about the task of organizing and directing the project of building the Atomic Bomb with single-minded devotion and competence.

After some initial organizational glitches, he had the sense to seek the aid of more experienced colleagues at how to run things. There were no delays and Oppenheimer allowed no protests to impede the accomplishment of the project. The official report on the Manhattan Project cited him as the one person credited with its implementation for military purposes. The Atomic Energy Commission had judged him virtually indispensable (Hijiya 164). While at work on the project, the teachings of the *Gita* were never far from his mind. Indeed, Oppenheimer often regaled his fellow workers at Los Alamos by evoking the wisdom of the *Gita*. He saw it as the crucial inspiration for the project’s success. He explained, in a speech to the Association of Los Alamos scientists, that it was their duty as scientists to build the bomb (Smith and Weiner 1980:317). It was their *dharma*. In fact, this sense of duty became the key managerial tool for Oppenheimer. It allowed him to manage the work as well as any ensuing conflicts. His fellow Manhattan Project scientist, Leo Szilard, and sixty-eight other scientists had signed a petition not to drop the bomb over a city (Smith 53-5). Szilard had wanted to submit this petition to President Truman. But Oppenheimer told physicist Edward Teller, who had come to him with the request, not to do so. He calmly stated: “Our fate was in the hands of the best, the most conscientious men of our nation, and they had information which we did not possess” (Brown
He thus forbade circulation of the petition (Smith 155, cited in Hijiya 138). Moreover, Oppenheimer refused to advocate any target other than a city, since he believed that such a target would not intimidate the Japanese (USAEC 236) who would view it like a ‘firecracker over the desert’ (ibid 34). Furthermore, he discouraged colleagues from even discussing the consequences of the bomb, since it would distract them from creating it (Smith and Weiner 240). Simply, he saw it as his duty to build the bomb and it was the duty of others to decide how to use it.  

Although happy when the test and the actual detonation over Japan were successful, Oppenheimer was otherwise detached from the fruits of his work. Just as Arjuna came to

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33 Oppenheimer’s attitude of detachment was picked up subsequently by other scientists, with varying degrees of sincerity. This stance of “doing own’s duty” was brilliantly parodied by Tom Lehrer in the late 1960s, in a satirical song where he sings of the “great American know-how of scientists and their “patriotism.”” The “American” scientist Lehrer evokes is Werner von Braun who so easily segued from being a Nazi rocket scientist into his Cold-War usefulness to the Americans

Gather 'round while I sing you of Wernher von Braun,
A man whose allegiance
Is ruled by expedience.
Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown,
"Ha, Nazi, Schmazi," says Wernher von Braun.

Don't say that he's hypocritical,
Say rather that he's apolitical.
"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?
That's not my department," says Wernher von Braun.

Some have harsh words for this man of renown,
But some think our attitude
Should be one of gratitude,
Like the widows and cripples in old London town,
Who owe their large pensions to Wernher von Braun.

You too may be a big hero,
Once you've learned to count backwards to zero.
"In German oder English I know how to count down,
Und I'm learning Chinese!" says Wernher von Braun
understand his duty as tied to his caste obligations as a *ksatriya*, so too did Oppenheimer understand duty in terms of his social class (a lesson taught by Ethical Culture) and his place (as a scientist) in society. As an American citizen, he defined his duty in terms of his profession and expertise. His duty of an American scientist was to build the bomb; it was the duty of the statesmen to decide how or whether to use it (Smith and Weiner 1980:317). “I did my job which was the job I was supposed to do. I was not in a policymaking position at Los Alamos” (*USAEC* 236). In “Physicists in the Contemporary World”, Oppenheimer spoke about the importance of scientists to do duty, consistently using vocabulary borrowed from of the Gita, (2.47; 4.20; 5.12; 12.11; 12.12; 18.2; 18.11), and emphasizing especially that they should not attempt to assume responsibility for “the fruits of their work.” At a memorial service for Roosevelt at Los Alamos after his death in April 15, 1945, Oppenheimer quoted the Gita; “Man is a creature whose substance is faith. What his faith is, he is “*(Gita 17.3)* (Smith and Weiner 288, cited in Hijiya 130). Throughout the process and as the bomb neared completion, Oppenheimer regularly cited it.

The extent of Oppenheimer’s intense involvement with the Gita as a source of inspiration and a guide for living has not received the attention it deserves. His involvement with the Sanskrit text is most famously eclipsed by the Gita passage that Oppenheimer claimed flashed into his mind upon the detonation at Los Alamos:

> If the radiance of a thousand suns
> Were to burst into the sky,
> That would be like
> The splendor of the Mighty One –

With a certain dramatic flair, the interviewer relating Oppenheimer’s account notes:
Yet, when the sinister and gigantic cloud rose up in the far distance, our Point Zero, he was reminded of another line from the same source:

I am become Death, the shatterer of Worlds. (Jungt 201, cited in Hijiya 124)

Oppenheimer’s Gita quote solidified slowly with subsequent retellings. In *Time Magazine*, the American public read:

Oppenheimer recalls that the lines of the Bhagavad Gita flashed through his mind: “I am become death, the shatterer of worlds.” (“The Eternal Apprentice,” *Time*, November 8, 1948: 77)

In the aftermath of the war, Oppenheimer was investigated as a potential security risk due to his poor choices in several appointments at Los Alamos, his ambiguous reporting of security risks, but primarily because of his resistance to the development of the Hydrogen Bomb – to be possibly used against the Soviets – in contrast to his willingness to develop the Atomic Bomb for use against the Japanese. His defense before the Commission was not stellar nor was the trial objective and well-run. Oppenheimer was stripped of his authority and lost his security clearance. It was a humiliation for someone who had so effectively served his country.

Oppenheimer’s “fate” now took on a life of its own and a new hagiography was put in place. Oppenheimer was no longer viewed as the genius scientist who loved poetry and read Sanskrit. He was now seen as a victim of the Red Scare hysteria and a government that persecuted him for what they suspected was his lack of patriotism. It was no longer of any interest how he used Indian philosophy to rationalize his involvement in creating the Atomic Bomb. His persona (that he cultivated) as the slightly mystical adept of Hindu wisdom who happened to be a scientist was replaced by the image of him as a tormented victim of the government, guilt-ridden by his
contribution to the bomb. In a NBC 1965 documentary, “The Decision to Drop the Bomb,” there is a close up of Oppenheimer where he recounts his memory of moments after the blast:

We knew the world would not be the same. . .I remember the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita: Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that one way or another.

Much has been made of this documentary image of him. It has been interpreted as showing Oppenheimer as haunted and forlorn (Banco 143). The reality was much more prosaic. After losing his security clearance, Oppenheimer’s “exile” consisted in his becoming the Director of Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Studies, not quite Ovid’s banishment to the far reaches of the known world described in the Tristia. It was not a bad early forced retirement for a scientist who had never made the discoveries of a Fermi or a Heisenberg and had he never produced the significant body of publications that his early promise had foreshadowed. His directorship of Los Alamos was his legacy and, as we have seen, his love of the Gita played a great role in his success.

Today, Oppenheimer is often portrayed as the ultimate victim of the military industrial complex, supported by post-McCarthy-era scholarship and artistic production. In a recent book of criticism, Oppenheimer’s comment that the bomb project was “technically sweet” (Polenberg 46) is seen as evidence of an “emerging form the discourse of efficiency, scientism and patriarchy” (Banco 130). But, the truth is that Oppenheimer never regretted the bomb. When he visited Japan in 1960, he was asked by reporters whether he felt guilt over the bomb and replied: “I do not regret that I had something to do with the technical success of the Atomic Bomb (Michelmore 241 cited in Hijiya 165). He said he would do it again (Lemont 302-3) and wished
he had finished the bomb sooner to drop it on the Germans for what they had done to the Jews. To the end of his days, he saw his involvement in terms reminiscent of the Gita. “I never regretted and do not regret now, having done my part of the job.” In the New York Times on August 1, 1965, (p. 8), he noted, ... “There was uncertainty of achievement not of duty.” He said on too many occasions that it was his duty that mattered. He firmly believed (as do most historians) that it saved lives by speedily ending the war. He had full knowledge of atrocities that had been committed by the Germans and were being committed by the Japanese. He felt that something had to be done to save Western civilization (Smith and Weiner 173). He hoped it would deter future wars (letter to Herbert Smith on August 26,1945 (Smith and Weiner 297, all cited in Hijiya 128). In 1966, in the month before his death, in an argument regarding the consequences of what he termed the subsequent “chattering,” Oppenheimer clarified that the important thing was “doing what I should.”

Ethical Culture had emphasized moral action in the world aimed at improving human welfare. Oppenheimer, rebelling perhaps at his upbringing, sought mystical renunciation of the world. Yet, he was also a product of his parent’s German Jewish attachment to Bildung. Rather than seeking the flowering of the self through aesthetic cultivation, he sought in the Gita a subjugation of the self through ascetic discipline. But, this asceticism was only partial because Oppenheimer was also a worldly cosmopolitan sophisticate with his pipe and pork-pie hat gracing the cover of a scientific journal. We hear of his charm as a host, particularly with the ladies, his ability to make a perfect martini, his collection of Van Gogh, Vlaminck, and Derain

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gracing the walls of his elegantly appointed 17th century-house in Princeton, complete with an artist’s studio for his wife, horses and stable for his daughter and photography studio for his son.

Oppenheimer contributed to his mythologization as the ascetic scientist. His appreciation of the Gita and his frequent references to it play no small part in this portrait. Harry M. Davis in an article in the New York Times Magazine (April 18, 1948:57) entitled, “The Man who Built the A-Bomb,” wrote that Oppenheimer “studied Sanskrit so that he could sip eternal truth from the bygone philosophies of India.” This article highlights Oppenheimer’s mysticism; it portrays him as a genius and “wise man” whose esoteric wisdom was as deep as his technical wizardry.

Oppenheimer’s appreciation of the philosophy of the Gita functions here “as an anodyne for the pangs of conscience” (Hijiya 125). For all his sincere love for the Gita as a genuine source of wisdom for him, the Sanskrit text was also an aesthetic and decorative accomplishment and a display of his virtuosity. In an interview on November 16, 1998, David Hawkins relates the following anecdote:

I once was sitting in his living room before the war in Berkeley, and to the left on the bookshelf was a whole string of classics. I saw Plato and pulled down a volume, and I said, ‘You know, I’ve just been studying this volume.’ And he said, owlishly, ‘I’ve read the Greeks, I find the Hindus deeper.’ Wow! One upmanship! He had that side too.

(Thorpe 54)

At the heart of Oppenheimer’s scientific and intellectual identity, Hindu philosophy could function as an ornamental cultivation, offering him the opportunity to engage the world while renouncing it.
Like many of us, Oppenheimer sought refuge from the world in which he felt ill at ease. His friend and colleague I.I Rabi disapproved, noting that if he “had studied the Talmud rather than Sanskrit” it “would have given him a greater sense of himself (cited in Thorpe 53). The attraction of the Gita was that it appeared to transcend its particular religious and cultural tradition (Thorpe 53). But, why, I ask? Here we can go back to Adler and his attempt to extract from Judaism and Christianity a universal morality. Maybe Oppenheimer was, after all, continuing Adler’s universalist ideal. In this respect, he was rather not unlike other Western questers who sought solace and inspiration in the Sanskrit classic. The Gita provided a guide by which privileged Westerners as gifted and entitled as Eliot and Oppenheimer could find meaning in a chaotic world, but at the same time showed that world how cultivated and interesting they were.

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What’s the Point in Caring? Bioethical Concerns in Roald Dahl’s Short Stories
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Abstract: Rapid technological advancements in medicine may exclusively be a scientific feat, but the bioethics of healing and patient care brings it into the field of humanities. This tripartite division of reason, logic and ethics is what separates the human subject from being reduced to a mere object of scientific query. Roald Dahl’s stories like “William and Mary” that deal with subjects that are reduced by circumstances and age into non-functional captives of their own bodies evoke the ethics of patient care while stories like “Royal Jelly” deal with mutative aspects of experimental medicine. Transhumanists like Nick Bostrom believe that technological advancements and many benefits they entail should be considered a practice of self-actualization while the bioconservatives like Francis Fukuyama believe that these experiments are dangerous and in contradiction with the concept of human dignity. This paper explores how Dahl’s imaginative recreation of the human contributes to this debate. The profoundly dehumanizing tendency of the short stories in their handling of subjects with cognitive and corporeal disabilities reveals a bioconservative stance. It aims to delve into the philosophical implications of caring for the castigated individuals as opposed to the evolutionary instinct to either transform or forsake them. I argue that Dahl’s short stories provide a preamble to the posthuman angst through a bleak overview of posthuman dignity.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, Short Stories, Human Dignity, Bioethics, transhuman / posthuman, care.

Martin G. Weiss in “Posthuman Dignity” attempts to define the term ‘dignity’ by taking recourse to the ideas of Immanuel Kant “who has developed the most influential view of human dignity, distinguished between two types of things in the world: things with a price and things with a dignity” (321). Dignity according to Kant is an inherent human quality that comes from rationality, which in turn, comes as a result of “emancipation from nature” (321), as a man evolves into a rational animal. For Weiss however, dignity is intrinsically linked to the body, more so the ‘natural’ body. Weiss believes that since the proliferation of medical and technological enhancements to the human body, the “essence” of humanity has been lost (321). Whether these augmentations and alterations of the body really impact the ‘dignity’ of the human being and whether it is ethical to allow these experiments since their ends justify the means are topics of contemporary bioethical debate. This paper deals with this debate in an attempt to explore the idea of the human body and dignity in an age of identity changing biological interventions.

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interventions.

It is a transhumanist belief that augmentation of the human body through scientific and
artificial means should be permissible and the individuals involved should be given absolute
morphological and reproductive freedom. In fact, it is a core belief of transhumanism that only
by “vigorously defending morphological and reproductive freedoms against any would-be world
controllers” (Bostrom 206) would humanity be truly safe from a science fiction-like dystopias
such as that in Brave New World (Bostrom 203). The transhumanists also insist that “dignity, in
its modern sense, consists in what we are and what we have the potential to become, not in our
pedigree or our casual origin” (Bostrom 213). The formation of the posthuman may be a
byproduct of these experiments. These may have “indefinite health-spans, much greater
intellectual faculties than any current human being – and perhaps entirely new sensibilities or
modalities” (Bostrom 203). In other words, there is really no way of knowing what
characteristics the posthuman will possess.

To this end, Francis Fukuyama directs readers towards Nietzsche and his concept of the
Übermensch in his discussion of the transhuman. He states that, while it is a desirable state to
which one might aspire, one must also exercise caution while venturing into undiscovered
territory (qtd. in Bostrom 209). Further warnings have been provided by the bioethical writings
of Leon Kass which act as an admonitory treatise on what may befall if one constantly abuses
nature’s gifts without completely understanding them:

Cockroaches and humans are equally bestowed, but differently natured. To turn a man
into a cockroach would be dehumanizing. To try and turn a man into more than a man
might be so as well. To avoid this, we need more than generalized appreciation for
nature’s gifts. (Kass “Biotechnology” 19)

This stance of cautionary skepticism has been supported by Fabrice Jotterand, Francis
Fukuyama. It has received qualified endorsement from Habermas. These individuals take a
bioconservative position as they believe that it is through a natural process of evolution over
thousands of years that man is bestowed with what we now know as humanity\(^1\) (Weiss 320-1). While Jotterand and Habermas argue for the essential incompatibility between the idea of a transhuman individual and human dignity (Sandler and Basl 63; and Weiss 325), Bostrom argues that human dignity is merely “a polemical substitute for clear ideas” (Bostrom 209) and as such admits degrees, some of which can be possessed by the posthuman.

Nick Bostrom avers that the fear of being posthuman stems from first, a fear of altering the conditions of what makes a human being, and second, the fear of the posthuman rendering “ordinary” human beings obsolete (Bostrom 204). To this, Weiss adds a third fear which is the loss of autonomy (Weiss 325). “For Kant the basis of human dignity is human autonomy” (Weiss 323). Simply put, Kant believes that the human ability to choose and make morally motivated decisions based on the faculty of reason is what constitutes dignity.

The bioconservatives believe that the posthuman is incapable of this autonomy because the process of creating a posthuman essentially alters human nature. On the other hand, the transhumanists believe that nature is far from a reliable guide to progress. Bostrom for one says that “Had Mother Nature been a real parent, she would have been in jail for child abuse and murder” (Bostrom 211). Bostrom mocks those who uphold nature as the cornerstone for human progress and asserts that leaving nature to determine the course of human life can only lead to disaster:

The horrors of nature in general and of our nature in particular are so well documented that it is astonishing that somebody as distinguished as Leon Kass should still in this day and age be tempted to rely on the natural as a guide to what is desirable and normatively right. (Bostrom 205)

While the question about what is morally correct and what is not is still open to debate, it is clear from Bostrom’s argument that nature is not the ideal yardstick for human ethics and ability. Today, the idea of what it means to be human is more tentative than fixed. The debate for and against human augmentation through artificial means, therefore, is bound to feature gaps that reflect the gaps in human understanding. Writers like Roald Dahl bridge this gap though an

\(^1\) Fukuyama and Habermas believe in an inherent idea of human dignity present in the unmodified, unenhanced human being (Weiss 320-321). However unlike Fukuyama’s approach, which is purely that of a naturalist, Habermas is more concerned about how the eugenics will impact existing social structures (Weiss 324).
imaginative leap and explore the social and psychological implication of transhumanism through a creative construction of a would-be world where whimsical augmentations are possible.

From children being shrunk and stretched in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to them being transformed into mice in The Witches, Dahl’s oeuvre is brimful of unnatural alterations of the human body. It has been recorded in various anthologies, interviews and even in the authorized biography of Roald Dahl that he would have become a doctor had he not become a writer (Warriner 1261).² Dahl’s preoccupation with medicine and the subsequent penchant for imagining a vivid array of morbid deaths and diseases have their roots within his experience with personal loss³ (Sturrock 368-69). In fact, according to Treglown, Dahl was so driven by despair that he longed for nothing more than to be “powerful enough to be able to conquer illness and other misfortunes” (Treglown 136). To this end, Dahl struggled through various real channels to ensure the medical facilities denied to his generation would be readily available to the next.

Dahl’s George’s Marvellous Medicine deals with the revenge that a child extracts on his foul-mannered grandmother. This revenge involves the child concocting his own formula of a ‘magic medicine’ that trumps traditional remedies⁴. In it lies Dahl’s own desire to discover a “polypill” (Warriner 1261) that cures all physical and psychological ailments. The trope of medicine and the interest in manipulating human physiology did not however, originate from this book. The archetype for Dahl’s exploration of pharmaceutical experiments and mishaps can be found in a large number of his short stories. With bioethics being recognized as a pressing concern in the field of medical humanities, Dahl’s short stories help historicize the concept and

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² His work in the field of philanthropy and medicine has been recorded by Warriner in a newspaper article. This article also examines the role of medicine and healing in Dahl’s book for children, George’s Marvellous Medicines.

³ Treglown records that Dahl’s father lost an arm when Dahl was fairly young; his sister died at the age of seven, and Dahl’s father Harold soon followed suit, succumbing to pneumonia a while later. Dahl continued to suffer loss in his later years: his son Theo was hit by a car when he was only four months old, causing him to suffer lasting neurological damage. This unfortunate accident inspired Dahl to explore the scientific world of medicine and remedy: . . . he founded a charity that provides funding for specialist pediatric nurses; and after his son Theo was injured in a car crash he developed, with a hydraulic engineer and a neurosurgeon, the Wade-Till-Dahl valve for use as a cerebral shunt in cases of traumatic hydrocephalus. (Warriner 1261)

⁴ The ‘Marvellous’ Medicine coincidentally makes George’s grandmother blow up into a balloon and later, vanish entirely.
provide an interesting study of human dignity in the face of undignified technological or medical mutation.

Through a study of Dahl’s short stories, I hope to explore such issues as the posthuman condition, bioethics of using experimental medical treatments, as well as the idea of human ‘dignity’ within the parameters of illness and treatment. These stories question the essential humanity of the protagonists by portraying them as mutated individuals who bear close resemblance to an animal or an insect. This paper explores the field of experimental medicine and the idea of saving or improving human life at the cost of human dignity.

In the three stories under consideration in the paper, the protagonists undergo various transmutative processes and subsequently suffer loss either in terms of self-harm or in their interpersonal relationships. I believe that Dahl’s stories illustrate a bioconservative stance in denying his genetically modified protagonist any dignity. This fear is clearly visible in stories like “Royal Jelly”, “Bitch” and “William and Mary” where biotechnology seems to work regressively upon the humanity of the individuals involved, taking from them their autonomy, and subsequently, their dignity. It does not always manifest itself in the subjects of the mutation but rather makes itself palpable to the reader through the reaction of others around them. Dahl’s short stories can therefore be studied as an embodiment of the debate between free will to embrace this ‘better’ or ‘enhanced’ life and the curse of leading that life as something less than human.

The short story “Bitch,” for instance, deals with the science of augmentation of human senses, but the ultimate result is not self-actualization, but rather dehumanization. The story revolves around a scientist Henri Biotte who is gifted with a very strong sense of smell and is on a quest to create a chemical compound which, when inhaled, unleashes the primal, libidinal drive in man that evolution has since mitigated. By taking mankind back to the “the period of post-glacial drift” (Dahl CSS 418) where he was more susceptible to influence from his animalistic ancestry, Henri hopes to make significant financial profits.

The mutative effect of the chemical compound begs certain fundamental questions about bioethics as adumbrated by Maier and Shibles: “The real moral question is what kind of a self is

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5 Martin G. Weiss calls it the “enhancement debate” (319).
being furthered and formed” (Maier and Shibles 137). Dahl seems to imply that intention may be very different from execution as far as technology is concerned. As already mentioned, Bostrom believes that the concept of dignity is not fixed, and as such may allow for a posthuman dignity.

The augmentation in “Bitch” which makes a person slave to his or her primal urges would prove otherwise. There is no autonomy that can be salvaged once one takes a whiff of the formula. Henri Biotte for instance has no control over his actions when he is under the influence of the formula: “I went completely wild! I was like a wild beast, an animal! I was not human! The civilizing influences of centuries simply dropped away!” (Dahl CSS 424)

This story brings up several questions about bioethics and the ability of medicine to undo thousands of years of evolutionary molding whether intentionally or by accident. The idea of dehumanizing the individual through the process of ‘enhancement’ is highlighted by constantly comparing the effects of the formula with that of a dog sniffing out a mate. Henri Biotte, having a weak heart condition dies of heart attack when exposed to the substance – “killed in action as they say” (Dahl CSS 432). His friend and sponsor Oswald also ends up in an extremely unfavorable situation when the vial containing the chemical spills in the company of an extremely unattractive woman. Through Dahl’s handling of the individuals involved in the story, it stands to reason that while transhumanism aims at taking steps forward on the evolutionary ladder, it is impossible to discern exactly in which direction it will lead. The dispute of course, remains whether the risks are worth the benefits.

The most extensive study of this debate is found in the short story “Royal Jelly, which testifies to Dahl’s preoccupation with the issue and his remarkable prescience.” This story deals with the concept of experimental medicine and its ability to potentially save lives, and create a future generation of super-humans; it also reflects on the idea of dignity and free will with respect to both morphological and reproductive freedom. In Dahl’s story, complete morphological freedom miscarries and creates a subsection of grotesque individuals whose appearances raise repulsion rather than awe. The protagonist of the short story, Albert Taylor, has an unusual fascination for bees. This he turns into a vocation by building his own bee hives and selling honey. He later becomes obsessed with the ‘royal jelly’ which is a biochemical

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6 This also brings up bioethical concerns of care-giving with respect to individuals who are no longer in complete control of their faculty. Is memory then, what constitutes a human being? What does this mean for instance for a patient with Alzheimer’s disease who has no autonomy over his actions or words?
secretion produced by the nurse bees to nurture the larvae. The worker bee larvae are fed concentrated royal jelly for only three days, and they grow at an exponential rate during this time. After this, they are fed the same formula, but diluted with other substances like pollen and honey. The larvae that ultimately become the queen bee however, are fed royal jelly in its concentrated form throughout their lives. This, according to the story, is what leads to their increased size, weight and virility.

Albert has little or no faith in doctors and medicines: “Did those doctors really know what they were talking about?” (Dahl CSS 88). Believing that conventional modern medicine had not reached the advancement he required, Albert Taylor turns to experimental medicine. When his wife Mabel has trouble conceiving, he starts to produce and consume concentrated amounts of royal jelly after getting the idea from a similar experiment conducted on a rat. The formula he concocts out of his several bee hives turns out to be a success, curing his sterility; after a few months on the dietary supplement of royal jelly, his wife gives birth to a baby daughter. Dahl’s take on the idea of reproductive freedom is a subversion of the feminist ideology that endows the woman with complete right over foetus and child care. By keeping his wife in ignorance about his ‘medication,’ arguably, this freedom is transferred from the mother to the father in the casual patriarchal manner — Dahl’s signature portrayal of patriarchy and other mainstream ideologies (Valle 2).

Perhaps as a side effect of the biochemical experiment, the baby refuses to eat and keeps losing weight until Albert hits upon an idea. He decides to feed the child “royal jelly” in concentrated quantities to nourish her and help her gain weight and mature faster. Mabel, who has no control over her own impregnation, also has no agency when it comes to keeping her child alive through the same formula. Her growing sense of shock and alienation from both her husband and her baby is the result of the transmutative effects of royal jelly on both of them. Dahl’s story allows for an examination of the idea of mutative freedom in case of experimental medicine whose side effects may be unknown. The philosopher Hans Jonas echoes Dahl’s views on body politic in the posthuman future: “The other side of power of today is the future bondage of the living to the dead” (qtd. in Bostrom 211). By this, he implies that the idea of free will becomes problematic when the actions of an individual lead to repercussions that extend to the next generation. Through the actions of Albert Taylor, the posthuman in the story when viewed
through the lens of contemporary trends in the humanities, autonomy is taken away from both his wife and his daughter. He imposes potentially mutative qualities on her that rob her of her future autonomy as well.

Albert Taylor taps into the resources available to the insect kingdom and exercises his morphological freedom. In the process, he saves his daughter’s life. However, this freedom, as evidenced from the reaction of the wife, comes at the cost of his dignity. The story ends with the grotesque description of the father and the child:

The big heavy haunted-looking eyes of the woman were moving intently over the man’s face and neck. There was no skin showing at all on the neck, not even at the sides below the ears. The whole of it, to a point where it disappeared into the collar of the shirt, was covered all the way round with those shortish hairs, yellowy black. . . The woman’s eyes travelled slowly downward and settled on the baby. The baby was lying naked on the table, fat and white and comatose, like some gigantic grub that was approaching the end of its larval life and would soon emerge into the world complete with mandibles and wings. (Dahl CSS 108)

Contra bioconservative belief that technological enhancements will decrease individuality and uniqueness, transhumanism posits the view that at least in the natal state of the posthuman, the essential difference between them and the “organic” humans would only create a greater degree of diversity, which is so important to human dignity (Sandler and Basl 64). The uniqueness in the Dahl story, however, only takes away the dignity of the protagonist.

The reader shares the terrified silence of the mother who witnesses her husband and her infant child transforming in front of her eyes. This brings to light Dahl’s insistence on exercising great caution before willingly disrupting the ‘natural’ course of events. In Bostrom’s words,

If one rejects nature as a general criterion of the good, as most thoughtful people nowadays do, one can of course still acknowledge that particular ways for modifying human nature would be debasing. Not all change is progress. Not even all well-intended technological intervention in human nature would be on balance beneficial. (205)

Both the “Bitch” and “Royal Jelly” deal with ‘well-intended’ drugs, but for whose far reaching side effects, the world, or even the creators themselves are not ready. In both the cases,
the drugs augment an individual biologically or organoleptically, but ultimately these posthuman individuals turn out to be devolved versions of their former selves, lacking the autonomy and rationale that characterizes a human being.\(^7\)

Similar ideas of devolution in the quest for progress can be seen in the short story “William and Mary.” This short story, which was Dahl’s answer to the problem of mortality and the universal human quest for longevity, shows a secular take on life after death. Preoccupation with longevity and possible methods of achieving immortality remains a central preoccupation of medical research today. It is the story about a man who, on his death bed, decides to collaborate with a scientist-friend named Landy to undertake a unique experiment. The basis of the experiment is also the fundamental basis of the entire branch of cryogenics,\(^8\) which is simply that the brain outlives the body, and if preserved and kept separately can remain essentially alive even after the body’s death. The story shows human consciousness as removed from and independent of, its bio-certifiable origins. This idea of preserving the brain is initially rejected by William who finds the idea “repulsive”, “pointless” and even “unpleasant” (Dahl CSS 18). However, being a man of cold, hard reason, William accepts Landy’s argument that attempting to preserve his consciousness was a logically sound decision. Bryan Appleyard comment in How to Live Forever or Die Trying: on the New Immortalitis pertinent here:

> We all know we must die. But that, say the immortalists is no longer true . . . . Science has progressed so far that we are morally bound to seek solutions, just as we would be morally bound to prevent a real tsunami if we knew how . . . . (Appleyard 22-23)\(^9\)

Incidentally, Landy, the scientist who discovers the method of preservation of consciousness after death, gets the idea from watching an experiment conducted on a dog. This invites obvious comparisons to “Bitch.” In both the stories, the subjects of the experiments are made to resemble an animal even though the process was one of augmentation. To add to the

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\(^7\) Arguably, technological advancements that cripple intellectual capabilities are “the exact antithesis of the transhumanist proposal” (Bostrom 206). However, one of the anxieties shared by the bio-conservatives is the unforeseen side-effects of technology that is meant to better mankind’s future.

\(^8\) Cryogenics is a branch of science where the brain is frozen in low temperatures after death till technology is available to revive the human consciousness. It is a branch of science devoted to the idea of eternal life and preservation of the body after death in case such a theory ever reaches fruition.

\(^9\) The title of Appleyard’s book How to Live Forever or Die Trying is from a black comedy about the Second World War: Joseph Heller’s Catch-22.
existing discomfort of the reader, Dahl delves into a distastefully graphic description of the experiment that was to follow:

So when I get you on the table I will take a saw, a small oscillating saw, and with this I shall proceed to remove the whole vault of your skull. You'd still be unconscious at that point so I wouldn't have to bother with anesthetic. . . (Dahl CSS 21)

The bioconservative fear that technological enhancements would lead to a subsection of individuals to “lose some of the moral status that they currently possess” (Bostrom 209) has been highlighted through the character of William who was already lacking in emotion and sympathy before the medical procedure. William, being a man governed by reason, has complete autonomy over the decision to undergo the surgical process. However, Dahl makes the experiment sound extremely unpalatable in order to indicate that this autonomy may be temporary.

The twist of the story lies in the revelation that eternal life for William would be quite unlike the one he had imagined. Reduced to the comically minimalistic physical units of the brain and an eyeball, William lies catatonic in a basin of cerebral fluid, maimed and yet fully sentient. This breaking down of the individual into constitutive parts brings in the metaphorical debate about mereological essentialism10.

Landy predicts that the brain and eyeball in the basin will exist in a transcendental state where “You can't have frustration without desire, and you couldn't possibly have any desire” without a body (Dahl CSS 26). Contrary to the premise, the eye that floats in the basin expresses “absolute fury” and possibly even despair when his wife informs him that she would extract revenge for years of subjugation by making him “do just exactly what Mary tells you” (Dahl CSS 35-36).

The story’s conclusion seems to bear out Kass’ prediction in Life, Liberty, and Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics, seems to have come true:

10 This complex metaphysical concept deals with the historically specific and sometimes even relationship between the parts and the whole. In the words of Alvin Plantinga, “If I replace a tire on my automobile, we think the same automobile persists through the change, acquiring a new part. But if I replace the automobile on my tire, then the whole that contains my tire is not the whole I began with – human bodies, for example – persist through small mereological changes: for example, haircuts” (470-471). Is the ethics of care-giving solely dependent on the conception of duties that are based on this idea of human body?
The final technical conquest of his own nature would almost certainly leave mankind utterly enfeebled. This form of mastery would be identical with utter dehumanization. Read Huxley’s *Brave New World*, read C.S. Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*, read Nietzsche’s account of the last man, and then read the newspapers. Homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings – these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project of technical mastery. In his moment of triumph, Promethean man will become a contented cow. (Kass LLDD 205)

Throughout the story there are hints that the relationship between William and Mary was far from ideal, with William being a domineering husband who curbed his wife’s free will: “All her life they [his eyes] had been watching her” (Dahl CSS 13). Ironically after death, he still continues to watch her through the severed optic nerve attached to the brain now floating in a basin.

Jotterand contends that transhuman dignity is only possible when in the process of making an individual transhuman, dignity is not removed from the source (Sandler and Basl 64). Arguably, by being reduced to a figure in constant need of care, William in Dahl’s short story has willingly sacrificed that dignity for the sake of longevity. This reaffirms the idea that the ethics of care-giving is based on a generally accepted conception of human body and its functions. William does not have a recognized disability, hence his care is not an ethical concern for the wife or the reader. Adding to his helplessness is his inability to speak. William’s silence at the end of the story has deeper philosophical connotations. Wittgenstein linguistic perspectivism seems relevant here: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (qtd. in Maier and Shibles 503). Dahl too seems to imply that human knowledge and consciousness cannot extend beyond human life¹¹. By muting William, Dahl renders his consciousness invalid and as he exists in a perpetual limbo between the living and the dead, in constant need of assistance and care.

The concept of care and the social convention of care-giving is a central concern of the story. Dahl challenges Nel Noddings’s assertion about the superiority of feminine care (Maier

¹¹ Attempts to explore the post-life consciousness have been made in several pieces of literature across the years, most notably, in Emily Dickinson’s poem that begins with the line “I heard a fly buzz – when I died” (266) Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries, Helen Vendler, Harvard UP, 2010.
and Shibles 202). In both “William and Mary” and “Royal Jelly” the wife is either denied or willfully surrenders the roles of care-giver.\footnote{The form of care Albert Taylor provides his infant daughter can be termed ‘identity egoism’ (Noddings 209) in which the care giver identifies with the object of care. Having undergone the same mutative process and sharing similar visible side effects, it stands to reason that the father would to a large extent identify with the daughter.} In the story, William puts blind faith in his wife’s devotion, which throughout his life has been “satisfactory” (Dahl CSS 14). He believes that he will be taken care of well as he lives on in a vegetative state for several, if not infinite, years. If one were to agree with Sandler and Basl’s view on the transhuman, the wife should feel no different about her husband just because he is now merely a brain and an eyeball floating in a jar. He is essentially the same person who underwent the procedure “…there is no in principle reason why being a cognitively transhuman individual should make it impossible for others (human or transhuman) to care about the individual or cooperate with the individual.” (Sandler and Basl 66). But that is not how things turn out in the Dahl short story.

These stories raise fundamental questions about human consciousness. They are seen as a social construct that is dependent on societal perception. William much like Albert, is no longer perceived as human by those close to him. The appearance of the transhuman as less than human or even as unlike human encourages what is called ‘the dehumanizing fallacy’ which leads to people treating those with illness or disability as if they were inanimate (Maier and Shibles 211). In “William and Mary”, the image of the brain and eyeball readily invite a comparison to the inanimate and the non-human rather than an advanced superhuman.

To quote Francis Fukuyama, “Nietzsche is a much better guide to what lies down the road than the legion of bioethicists and casual academic Darwinians that today are prone to give us moral advice on this subject. (Qtd. in Bostrom 209)”

The Nietzschean Übermensch, then, is a secular idea of the transhuman, “a being whose distance from conventional humanity is greater than the distance between man and beast” (Magnus and Higgins 9). Dahl’s view of the transhuman is, needless to say, not derived from the Übermensch. Dahl takes up the role of the ‘casual academic Darwinian’ and illuminates the dark end of the path to progress. His take on the issues of human augmentation through ‘unnatural’ or scientific means indicates a need for judicious and restrictive morphological freedom. Bostrom argues that a larger political body should step in and obstruct such freedom only “in cases where
somebody is abusing these freedoms to cause harm to another person” (Bostrom 210). This of course, brings up the question of self-harm as something that should be prevented through an institutionalized body politic as in all three discussed stories, the detriment is self-inflicted and suffered in isolation.

Despite several artistic reimagining of a dystopian posthuman, Roland Sandler and John Basl in their 2010 essay “Transhumanism, Human Dignity, and Moral Status” are concerned about the dangers of simply dismissing advancements that could potentially better human health and life span, based solely on fear. According to them, these forms of technologies are not as antithetical to the idea of dignity and individuality as they are made out to be. In fact, they are a necessary step towards progress as they may lead to “cognitive enhancement . . . in addition to a great capacity for memory or problem solving than non-augmented individuals” (65). Accepting transhumanism and the augmentation that it entails helps humankind realize its latent potential, and can be a step towards self-actualization.

The only possible conclusion that can be derived from this debate is the one stated by made by Maier and Shible — in order to implement a proper ethical stance towards the transhuman, society as a whole has to undergo a major change. To avoid the ultimate neglect of either the posthuman or the ‘original’ human, social structures need to be altered and made inclusive. Bostrom expresses his view in favour of a new structure of social systems to assimilate the enhanced with the unenhanced section of society: “We can work to create more inclusive social structures that accord appropriate moral recognition and legal rights to all who need them be they male or female, black or white, flesh or silicon” (Bostrom 210). By extension, entities, whether they are human or an insect-like sub human, possess a whole corporeal body or merely be a brain and eyeball, all should have equal dignity. Dahl’s stories question the very basic premise of bioethics, which is the right of every individual to be treated with dignity.

The paper limits itself to a modest task – raising several crucial questions about ‘species being’ while highlighting the debate between the bioconservatives and transhumanists. Is human nature a byproduct of genetic composition, or is it simply a result of a variety of environmental factors? Can a technological augmentation of organoleptic properties alter human nature? What role does such a turn have on social structures, interactions and politics? For Dahl, augmentation
always leads to a disturbing loss of autonomy that renders the idea of human dignity comical and redundant.

Fictional narratives like Dahl’s short stories adumbrate the issue of human dignity in imagined societies on the cusp of genetic engineering breakthroughs. These narratives lay equal emphasis on the cognitive and emotive aspects of the problem, enriching the critic’s understanding of the issue.

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Towards a Posthuman Future: Androgyny, Transhumanism and Culture

Lakshmi Pillai

Abstract

This paper aims to look at the scope of transhumanism in the erasure of constructed binary formations through the synthesis of conflicting ideologies and its impact on culture. When conflicting ideologies confront each other, the resultant future is ideally of a synthetic formation. In the conflict between patriarchy and feminism, the future seems to tend towards feminism because the latter upholds the equality among the genders, irrespective of social categorization. Even as it recognizes the existence of it, it rebels against socio-cultural formations. The future could possibly tend towards androgyny and transhumanism. Both are not synonymous but they embody the synthetic formation. The act of procreation was traditionally associated with the feminine. The figure of Thomas Beatie, the first “pregnant man”, and the controversy surrounding his gender, with many contesting the revolutionary nature of the pregnancy since Thomas Beatie was born female, with Beatie himself declaring that the desire to have children is not feminine, but human, presents an interesting challenge to critics interested in the future of gender relation.

Keywords: androgyny, gender, transhumanism, posthumanism, identity politics, body

Evolution, throughout the years has been biologically rooted, is an act of nature. The evolution of the human species might now just involve co-evolution with science and technology. In the constant attempts to push beyond nature-imposed limits, humans have begun to incorporate technology extensively. Even as bioconservatists cite ethics, morality and religion to deter transhumanist bids, it has been understood that “no ambition, however extravagant, no fantasy, however outlandish, can any longer be dismissed as crazy or impossible” (Regis). The acceptance of androgyny in pop culture, transhumanist improvements to life all point to a posthuman future where technology stands not in opposition to humanity but as a co-evolutionary necessity. The legitimacy of socio-cultural constructions ceases to exist and all limiting modes of expression and existence faces eventual dismantling as the transhuman evolves to its eventual posthuman stage. This stage is characterized by the decline of “exceptionalism”,...
“systems integrated with other systems” (Kevin LaGrandeur) to become a unified collective without discriminatory structures.

Nick Bostrom in “Are You Living in A Computer Simulation?” argues that there exists a possibility that “the human species is very likely to go extinct before reaching a “posthuman” stage”. This paper however seeks to discuss the concepts of androgyny and transhumanism in culture as indicative of a posthuman future, irrespective of its occurrence in relation to the longevity of the human race. The titular word ‘towards’ is thus selected to emphasize that the future is posthuman, culturally, indicative from the cultural practices today and the tendencies identified in cultural and scientific inclinations. Hierarchical and hegemonic socio-cultural formations are detrimental to a community that should thrive on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. Rigidity cannot operate for long, with the excuse of morphological differentiation to legitimize discrimination and violence. Transhumanist endeavours to create better human selves have opened a new opportunity to dismantle limiting norms. The study aims to emphasize that transhumanism is capable of liberating the human species from its perilous, restrictive prejudices by evolving humans in tandem with the machinic evolution towards higher intelligence.

An interpretative and analytic approach was used to investigate the trends in androgyny in culture, and various interpretations of transhumanism and posthumanism. There is a rapid rise in the success of androgynous modes of gender expression. The phrase ‘gender expression’ used alongside the word ‘androgyny’ might come across as odd as androgyny tends to neutralize patriarchal gender formations that are construed in opposition to each other. But several instances in culture have depicted that androgyny is used both as a gender expression and also as an anti-gender expression. The best example is the global success of
South Korean male idol group BTS. In comparison to Western hegemonic masculinity, BTS and their male idol counterparts in the South Korean pop industry present a ‘softer’ masculinity, incorporating several traits often tagged as ‘feminine’. “Asian musicians switch seamlessly between what is considered feminine and what is considered masculine in a way that is thrilling – and liberating. Their tremendous global platform provides them with a means of creating a new norm for masculinity, one that is more organic and experimental” (The Daily Vox). The resulting expression thus is not asexualized or a new formation as it still imbibes qualities of the gender that is considered as the ‘original’, corresponding to the sex assigned at birth. Therefore, while androgynous elements do exist, it is not realized in its entirety. On the other hand, androgyny as a mode of gender fluidity and as a means of dismantling normative gender expressions is also finding its own ground. One such example is the American model and activist Rain Dove who prefers to call herself, a ‘gender capitalist’. She explains the term: “Gender Capitalism is both Feminist and Masculinist. It’s everything-ist. It’s the recognition that I, as an organism, am treated differently based on my perceived genitalia and the identity surrounding that relationship” (Posture Mag).

Identities created all stem from the possession of genitalia and bodies become instruments of power. Gender capitalism, understood from Dove’s explanation, is the awareness of bodies as mere instruments. Capitalizing on the projection of body through self-expression is Dove’s understanding of self-empowerment. The body thus is perceived as capable of infinite expression, playing with, and at the same time, liberating it from, heteronormative gender formations. Such strategic androgyny will lead humankind into an ideal state of non-differentiation. Non-differentiation distinguishes itself from undifferentiation. The Bem Sex Role Inventory talks of undifferentiation as low on feminine and masculine traits. Non-differentiation,
as a term used in this study, is specifically understood not as a state of sameness but rather that of fluidity. Fluidity relates to performativity and reconciliation to what Judith Butler observes in Undoing Gender as the “conflictual character of the psyche” (Undoing Gender 133). There is a constant conflict between essentialism and gender self-determination and strategic androgyny seeks to resolve this through fluidity. Androgyny, though of infinite capacity, operates on limited grounds. It doesn’t alter physiologies and thereby cannot grant a subject complete access to a state of subjective experience wholly removed from that connected to the sex assigned at birth. For instance, pregnancy as a bodily experience is accessible to the female sex. Androgyny cannot operate to provide this subjective experience to a human that does not have the capacity to carry an offspring.

Technology can. Sex-change operations have enabled that. An interesting case in this instance is Thomas Beatie, known as the world’s first “pregnant man.” As a transman, Beatie lives the life of a man but is able to access the physiology of both sexes. This, however, might not be desirable to other transmen as female physiology often leads to “dysmorphic…days” (Feminism in India). Beatie said that the desire to have children is human and therefore, a species desire. Though pregnancy is seen as an ability that the female body possesses and thus feminized, Beatie refuses to see it as a ‘female process’. This insistence is important to critique the pseudoscientific discrimination against women and sexual minorities. Beatie’s opinion on pregnancy challenges body possibilities and opens a new space of possibilities where individuals can make free, non-institutionalized choices to determine their own lives. This kind of agency begins through the de-linking of institutionalized bodies from social formations of sex and gender.
Thus processes, activities, desires and identities are removed from gender rigidity or sex specificity but rather enter its own state of existence. This is possible through redefining the human body and the collective species-existence as subjective and dynamic rather than static and limited. Transhumanist endeavours have already decreased mortality rates and enabled remarkable advancements in medical science. Many physical disabilities are no longer seen as major deterrents to human capacity and thus the subjective experience is no longer limited as it was earlier. Human morphology can be altered. And with this alters the socio-cultural principles derived from the political construction of the human body. The success of androgyny is not a recent phenomenon; increase in women’s participation in the workforce witnessed incorporating fashion choices, attitude and behavioural patterns commonly associated with men. But men readily incorporating socially constructed feminine traits is not as widespread as it is today, albeit in pop culture. Androgyny is more of an aesthetic, expressive choice. Transhumanism on the other hand, has the ability to realize androgyny on levels morphological, physiological and in the future, even psychically.

The evolution of human culture has always inhabited in a realm that seeks to disassociate with the wild ‘animal’ perceived as its ‘original state of being’. All of human psychology, insecurities, fears, instincts and perception, works on the paradigm of human vs animal. Or more precisely, man vs animal since women were not really considered as human and their emotional nature and reproductive ability resulted in her construction as ‘part of the wilderness’. The simultaneous disgust and fascination of the wild and the untameable has been the basis of the several cultural movements that attempted to draft a human, civilized and intellectually organized. Kurmo Konsa in “Artificialisation Of Culture: Challenges to and from Posthumanism” uses the word ‘artificialisation’ to talk of human reorganization of the
environment and culture, elucidating that artificialization is “an anthropogenic transformation of the environment that predominantly takes place under the influence of technological systems”. She discusses the fear and the fascination of the wild as the basis of ‘Othering’ modes of existences that are non-normative. Instead of an expected ideal of tolerance and harmony in the era of liberal democracy and globalization, panicked reactions to rapid flow and exchange of cultural information has led to closed culture and dissolution of flexible cultural mores to superficial fundamentalism, retaining hostility. According to Konsa, the resultant “cultural relativism” leads to hierarchical comprehension of cultures, reverting to the binary of savage and civilised. Transhumanism has led to the severance, or possibly, and quite interestingly, the conflation of the human and animal binary. Irrespective of the resolution of the conflict, the animal-human, as Donna J. Haraway states in “The Cyborg Manifesto”, is now a “leaky distinction” (152). She elaborates that “[1]ate twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (152). She elucidates the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, and physical and non-physical. Haraway’s cyborg calls for a non-essentialized, material-semiotic metaphor that can potentially unite diffuse political coalitions on the lines of affinity instead of identity. As transhumanism constantly modify human bodies and experiences of living, humans become trans-humans and potentially a state where subjective experience is no longer gendered because machinic incorporations can possibly lead to a unified individual, beyond human.
Cary Wolfe notes Foucault’s observation, his insistence that humanism is “its own dogma, replete with its own prejudices and assumptions” and founded on Balibar’s “anthropogenic universals” and simply an establishment of “different degrees of humanity” (xiv). Humanism thus reproduces normative subjectivity and transhumanism is consequently an “intensification of humanism” (xv). Even as Wolfe sees transhumanism as an improvement of humanism that is not liberating in any sense, the ability of transhumanism to structurally alter the subjective experience of human existence puts forth the notion that transhumans are “eventual posthumans”, understanding posthumanism as not a state of ‘after-human’ as R.L. Rutsky notes (xvii) but rather as anti-humanist, extending subject experience beyond that of the human. The posthuman dismantles anthropocentrism. Even as transhumanism enhances anthropocentrism, the hyperreality of morphological modification leading to subjectivity not characteristic of the embodied human subjectivity, will eventually lead to dismantling of anthropocentrism as the body and body processes become irrelevant to the eventual rise of the posthuman dignity.

Different versions of posthumanisms will be embattled on ethical grounds as the ultimate fear of erasure of human existence by artificial intelligence takeover, looms. Posthumanism evolves as machines evolve and conflation intensifies paradoxes only to destroy them completely. Dualisms can no longer thrive on heteronormative fodder and perceptions of reality become bendable and in complete defiance of constructed limits.

There is an interesting thought in the famed sci-fi action manga/ anime that was recently adapted into a Hollywood feature film in 2017, Ghost in the Shell: “What if a cyber-brain can create its own ghost, its own soul?” It is perhaps the essence of this wonder that forms the crux of the ultimate scientific tiff with ethics. Must there be a line that has to be defined as humans constantly innovate and push boundaries? As global terrorism has occupied an extensive
command over cyberspace, it has become amply clear that the future is all about optimum control of the cyberspace, push towards new innovative technologies and expanding all frontiers of digitalization. The future is, posthuman.

Who decides the ethical nature of the application? Take for instance immersive virtual reality that is hypothetically assumed to stimulate a consensus reality that has already been attempted at with augmented simulations and virtual reality applications. The original intention of simulated reality was all about helping disabled individuals but now it has found other applications as well. While related applications are aimed at enhancing the gaming experiences, it could potentially push the boundaries of art and philosophy, connecting people through shared experiences. Ironically it could also result in immunity towards sensitivity, overlooking the individuality of experiences and the complexity of individual human experiences.

Nick Bomstrom states, in the section titled “The Technological Limits of Computation”, that “At our current stage of technological development, we have neither sufficiently powerful hardware nor the requisite software to create conscious minds in computers” which basically neutralises the possibility stated earlier from Ghost in the Shell. AI takeover is not really a possibility.

What becomes then of Immanuel Kant’s insistence on “Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own intelligence!” Intelligence and reality perception stand altered and continually undefinable in a posthuman world. Take for instance the simulated reality depicted in The Matrix series. Perhaps the only reality that exist is the one we accept because realities are no longer physical and cannot be physically or empirically understood. This alludes to Gilbert Ryle’s concept of “ghost in the machine” (Concept of the Mind 069) where Ryle insists that to talk of existence in the mind and body Cartesian dualism is as absurd as to ask if there exists a ghost in a
device that makes it function. Ryle foregrounds rather the basis of existence as ‘thinking’, the *cogito*. The idea of the *cogito* (propounded by Rene Descartes) has faced criticism that attempt to centre the point of existence to bodily experience such as death (Martin Heidegger) and action (John Macmurray). The faculty that humans place as that which distinguishes it from machines is questionable as imitative and simulative alternatives question the authenticity of the actual. This, therefore, is indicative of a posthuman future where there is a transcendence from binaries and into a machinic reality of collective existence as posthumans. The survival of the fittest no longer works because the concept of the fittest is malleable as will be hierarchy and order. All meaning will be open to a field of continuous play as the Derridean différance reigns to dismantle social constructions.

Nick Bostrom discuss the concerns of species threat in “In Defence of Posthuman Dignity” with the example of transsexuals and the dismissive nature of society, devaluing and marginalising them. Acceptance of transhumans is not an overnight phenomenon. It takes time and can only be realised when it can be allowed to thrive. In the endeavour towards posthuman dignity, Bostrom says that we ought to “work to create more inclusive social structures that accord appropriate moral recognition and legal rights to all who need them, be they male or female, black or white, flesh or silicon”. Human and posthuman dignity are not in opposition; “[transhumans] insist that dignity, in its modern sense, consists in what we are and what we have the potential to become, not in our pedigree or our causal origin. What we are is not a function solely of our DNA but also of our technological and social context. Human nature in this broader sense is dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable”. The future belongs to the posthuman and every attempt to suppress such a possibility cannot succeed as humans have already normalized the role of technology in expanding sense and subjective experience that to be rid of
it would be akin to de-evolution. One may argue that the mass production of transhumans to an ideal state of perfection would result in the creation of Frankenstein’s creature, a monstrous imitation, albeit of the self, by the self. But then again, to view the creature as monstrous is to subscribe to humanist ideals that have already been dismantled in poststructuralist thought. Victor Frankenstein’s declaration is a resounding goal of the ultimate transhumanist belief: “there is only one worthy goal for scientific exploration. Piercing the tissue that separates life from death.” Frankenstein’s creature is not the dark, dangerous Other; Frankenstein’s creature is not an outwardly manifestation. The creature does not exist because the experiment is on the self. And self, as transhuman, will herald a posthuman feature, not of machinic monsters but of a synthesis of human and machine, a discovery of the self and the world, not as mystical tales but rather, mathematical, solvable equations.

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Of Transgender Bodies that Matter: Queering the Media Narratives in Kerala

Anu Kuriakose

Abstract: This paper locates the construction and contestation of transgender identities in the state of Kerala post the government sponsored transgender survey, the introduction of the transgender policy 2015 and the shifting trends of representing transgenders in visual media (television and cyber space) and print media in the state since then. The regional public sphere is historically configured in terms of transphobia and homophobia even though the queer political activism in Kerala emerged much earlier and has gained significant grounds. The Kristevian notions of abjection, pathologizing and the excess of moral anxieties have been observed in the regional public sphere concerned with transgender identities and a number of socio-cultural programs are shifting from the fractured aesthetics on the transgender body as a tabooed object to the Lacanian notion of object of desire or object petit a. This paper, using visual ethnography and literature review grounded on emerging transgender theories demonstrates that the new discussions on gender issues in the state of Kerala are enmeshed in the debates on transgender identities in the public sphere. The media reports form transgender narratives in the region — their struggles for existence, knowledge production, critiques of the social imagination of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, and the celebration of transgendered bodies.

Key words: Transgender identities, Kerala, Transphobia, Abjection, Transgender body, object petit a,

‘Transgender’ encompasses the unique potential for personal expression and transsexuals\(^1\), cross-dressers, intersex people\(^2\), bi-gendered or multi gendered individuals fill the spectrum of transgender identity. As Indrani Sen in her Human Rights of Minority and Women’s (Transgender Human Rights Volume 2) (2005) puts it, “transgender is the most commonly used term to describe people who cross socially constructed gender boundaries” (4). In the early 1990s transgender as a politics as well as transgender studies as a twin of queer studies (Susan) emerged in the West, intertwined with feminist politics. The founding essay in transgender

\(^1\)A person who has undergone the Sex Reassignment Surgery, See. Raymond, Janice. The Transexual Empire, Teachers College Press,1979.

studies “The Empire Strikes Back: A (post)transsexual Manifesto” sees transsexuals as “oppressed minority” and proposes that transsexuals “currently occupy a position nowhere, which is outside the binary opposition of gendered discourse” (Stone 230). The transgender model in the West has been based on the recognition of gender-based oppression, the positioning of trans people as problematically situated with respect to the binary categories of man and woman and the endorsement of the politics of visibility. The transnational expansion of ‘transgender’ as an identity and activism varies in the Global South, especially in India, from the Western understanding of transgender identity-construction and theoretical positions. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy critique the risks involved in replicating the colonial models of transnational transgender identities and marginalizing the South Asian discourses and practices of sexual variance as merely “‘local’ expressions of transgender identity” (320). They have also inquired into the fights for existence in society to the citizenship debates of transgender people in the contemporary Indian scenario. This paper examines the visibilisation (to coin a term) of the transgender identity in Kerala, a state on the South-West of the Indian subcontinent, and the paradigm shift in representing the non-normative gender identities in the regional newspapers, television and cyber space post 2014, when the state conducted a transgender survey\(^3\) and adopted a transgender policy,\(^4\) a first of its kind. The media in Kerala influences the collective imagination on transgenders in the public sphere which was once enmeshed with the debates on


\(^4\)The policy document affirms the rights of transgender people in line with the Supreme Court verdict 2014: <https://kerala.gov.in/documents/10180/46596/State%20Policy%20for%20Transgenders%20in%20Kerala%202015> (21 December 2017).
homosexuality and gender non-conformity, seen as aberrations, and ostracised the homosexuals and transgenders, who were silenced or migrated to other states in search of identity and solace. The paper traces transgender identities in the region prior to the transgender policy, with a close reading of the available recorded history before proceeding to analyse the contemporary queer politics and how the varieties of media forms at present record the transformation in the academic, cultural, and political sphere and these records form media narratives concerned with the identity quest and emancipation of transgenders in Kerala. It studies media reports on transgender participation in the Kottankulangara Bhagavati temple’s Chamayavilakku festival, the queer pride parades in the urban spaces in Kerala and associated queer cultural festivals, trans beauty pageants, transgender art-photo exhibitions, the sensationalism of transgender marriages in Kerala, which it sees as an instance of a political act of ‘coming out’. It also takes a close look at the media response and publicity of transgender visibility surrounding the recent Malayalam film Njan Marykkutty (Dir. Ranjith Sankar).

The media reports show the shift of transgender representation from the Kristevian notions of abjection,5 to object petit a or objects of desire for the public. The paper also critiques the consumption of the heterosexual imagination on the ‘normalised’ or surgically re-appropriated transgender bodies in television and print media which is being celebrated. In North India and a few South Indian states the effeminate males who live as a community are known by different names like hijra, jogappa, jogta, kothi, aravani, etc. They are the visible transgenders and who have been traditionally earning their livelihood by begging and prostitution. In her study within the discipline of anthropology, Serena Nanda posits that these

5Kristeva describes subjective horror (abjection) as the feeling when an individual experiences, or is confronted by (both mentally and as a body), what Kristeva terms one's “corporeal reality”, or a breakdown in the distinction between what is ‘self’ and what is ‘Other’, See. Julia, Kristeva, The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Columbia UP,1986.
identities have no exact match in Western taxonomy of sex and gender and challenge such Western classification. It is limiting/narrowing down the complexities of identities if one tries to view transgender solely within the framework of sex/gender binaries as the quintessential ‘third sex’ or ‘neither men nor women’, for they seem to dismantle the categories of sex/gender as viewed by the society and create a new category of binary division of their own. Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from the ‘perceived norm’ of a population may thereby become subject to marginalization.

The term ‘transgender’ was historically silenced and rendered invisible in Kerala, as it is “the farthest, geographically as well as culturally from a Hindi speaking metropolitan mainstream contemporary India” (Muraleedharan 47), and remained aloof from the LGBT discourses for a long time. However, there were invisibilized homosexual practices in certain regions as the scholarly inquiries in the field bring to light that male intimacies were central to masculine practices of social gathering in Kozhikode (Osella) and the slang ‘kundan’ was used to refer to the homosexual culture in Malabar. In Thrissur, a district of central Kerala, flutes were identified with the practice of same sex in ethnographic studies conducted in the region (Rajeev). The foundation of the same sex group Men in India Movement in Kochi was a culminating moment, and the Malabar Cultural Forum formed in Calicut in the late 90s promoted the creative expression of homosexuals and transgenders through art and culture. However, the strong patriarchal familial social system prevailed in Kerala forced the queer people to migrate to other states in search of identity, livelihood and existence as the state lacked support system for the LGBT community like the hijada subcultures in other Indian states. Social activism and the emergence of queer movement as intellectual and political development also contributed to the fledging of paradigm shift in gender and sexuality debates in Kerala’s
recent history. The impact of Western education and post 1990 globalization process largely affected imaginations beyond the limits of the homo- hetero binarism. Though the existence of the people who belong to gender variance cannot be ruled out, it is pertinent to note that transgender community is historically invisibilized in Kerala due to the following reasons: the society is very reluctant to accept those who deviate from the norm, also transgender identity is perceived by the public imagination on the hijra community in urban areas outside Kerala, and those people feel gender dysphoria often escape to these places that offer livelihood for their existence (Krishna).

The non-normative gender performances claimed the space in the public sphere and discussion concerned with gender identities in Kerala has been going through a continuous and rigorous transformation. For transgenders, the struggle by themselves, the support from Community Based Organisations (CBOs), government initiatives, and queer political activism helped in reclaiming the spaces that ostracised and dislocated them. Multiple developmental indices titled Kerala as a ‘model’ state and the post 1990s increasing urbanisation and economic liberalisation formed queer subculture (Khan) in the state like the other cities in India and the new media act as an organizer for different queer groups. The media in Kerala recorded these events and a close examination of the history would demarcate the transformation happened in the region. The local newspapers, news magazines and the visual media sensationalised same sex relations, lesbian suicides and gender non-conformity as non-normative initially (Muraleedharan, Vasudevan). However, with the state sponsored Transgender Survey, and Transgender Policy, a shift began to happen. The print and visual media in Kerala “at once made possible a spatially organised public and a narratively constituted one” (Radhakrishnan 196). The political activism and the re-shaping of the public sphere in Kerala are highly influenced by the print, visual and
the social media in cyber platforms as Kerala has the “cultural practice of reading - pointing to one of the significant aspects of Kerala as a state, its avid, everyday consumption of print and visual culture” (Mokkil 4).

A paradigm shift on transgender visibility happened in the social scenario of Kerala with the 2014 Supreme Court Verdict recognizing the transgender’s political and civic rights and the Social Justice Department of Kerala conducted a transgender survey in 2014-2015 which covered the social and personal aspect of their life. The term ‘transgender’ was officially documented for the first time instead of locally used derogatory terms like ‘penpoosu’, ‘onpath’, ‘Monaca’ etc. Based on the findings in the survey, the state adopted a Transgender policy in 2015 which was unveiled at the International Conference on Gender Equality held in the same year in Kerala. The transgender survey covered the basic details of a person, one’s gender awareness and about the body, civil rights, self-esteem, and access to health service ability to live with dignity and freedom, there is also a section to understand the priorities, needs and aspirations of transgenders in the document (State Policy for Transgenders in Kerala 2015). The transgender Survey and Transgender Policy can be discerned as the first effort to the modern understanding of transgender as a citizen and the effort to locate such identities in Kerala which closed its eye at the individuals experiencing gender dysphoria for a long time. Also, the policy document is the first official document and an initiation of the recorded history of transgenders in Kerala, both the Male to Female (MtF) as well as Female to Male (FtM) transgenders, endorsing ‘regionalism’ in it. The Transgender Survey ruptured the hetero-normative understanding of the public sphere in Kerala moreover it invited the attention of the state government to a number of programs and policies like the recognition of transgenders as the citizens and giving them the right to vote (John). The premier university in the state, the
University of Kerala for the first of its kind adopted a Transgender Policy\(^6\) for its transgender students modelling on the state policy for addressing equal opportunity, respect and educational needs. To bring the transgender students to the mainstream by education and to remove the social stigma is the main concern of the policy document. As a consequence, the university ensured anti-ragging and counselling services, syllabus revision, scholarships and other benefits apart from the other TG friendly infrastructures (University of Kerala Policy for Transgender Students). The media in the state recorded these activities and the queering happens in the space which opened the floor for further debates on transgender people’s social mobilization.

The gender performances that deviate from the social expectation are marked as non-normative and transgenders in Kerala have been traumatised and silenced in their home and society for a long time. However, the gender inversion at the Kottankulangara temple has the religious sanctity as a ritual that seeks the blessing of the Bhagavati. The festival is depicted in a few Malayalam films like *Odum Raja Adum Rani* (directed by Viju Verma) and *Tamaar Padaar* (directed by Dileesh Nair, 2014). Though it is a part of the temple festival, the cross-dressed men’s lamp holding ceremony, single-handedly made it a bustling site of pilgrimage.

The festival has seen the participation of an increasing number of homosexual and transgender people from Kerala, for them, it is a celebration of their own identity. The temple premise offers a temporary realm of transgendering for the gender non-conforming biological male. It is stated in media that the event offered transgenders “the freedom to dress up as woman and travel in buses without much stigma” (Arya). Connecting with the Bhaktinian notion of carnival and the festival in the media reports as, during *Chamayavilakku*, the temple space

transforms to “carnival site where, under the aegis of a religiously sanctioned festival, the transgenders ‘appear’ for two nights” (Nair). The hetero-patriarchal familial system that shuns the transgenders and eschews their presence at home and in public places ironically let the male children to hold the lamp in cross dress to commemorate the myth concerned with the origin of the temple. The transgender people in the state initially saw it as a religious sanction to exhibit themselves among the cross-dressed males. The ritual is recorded in contemporary media in Kerala as transgenders find the space as normalising, and for the public it gives a sense of visual spectacle. The media reports, especially the footage of the visuals of the lamp holding rituals of the transgender people circulated in YouTube channels and cyber platforms document the shifting trend of transgender visibility in Kerala. If transgender people attended the festival without acknowledging their identity, the contemporary media coverage transforms the act of participation into a political act of ‘coming out’ and a reclaiming of forbidden spaces.

Queer pride parades have been conducted in Kerala by the support groups for the local LGBT community, CBOs and queer activists in the state map the pride and protest in the state since 2010. The parades happened so far at major cities in the state transformed the public sphere

Fig.1&2 The poster of 7th Queer Pride parade and media report on the parade.
and ‘temporarily queered’ them (Rushbrook). The event gathered attention from academicians as well as the media in the region who covered the event as a political move by the community to persuade the public to recognize their identity, gender visibility and rights.

The allied cultural festivals in the queer pride parade like seminars, art exhibitions, film screening, beauty pageants and fashion show make the festival a carnival. Like the Bakhtinian notion of carnival, the city space is transformed to a carnival site, and an expression of the community, Terry Eagleton observes Bakhtinian carnival as “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony” (148). The hegemony of the dominant is resisted in the festivals. It questions the normative gender roles and the social construction of gender and also exhibits the fluidity of gender performance in the public sphere. The fashion show in the queer festival provided platforms for the transgenders to walk on ramp for the first of its kind. Those transgender bodies which were looked at with aversion and designated as taboos in the public sphere were celebrated during the festival. They became the fascination for the spectators and other participants in the festival. The Kristevian notions of abjection as well as the Lacanian notions of object petit a can be connected while reading the restructuring of the space during the festival. When the transgender bodies are dismissed as abjects or something that is devoid of any dignity, the Lacanian notion corresponds to the opposite as the object that creates fascination in the spectator. The transgenders turn out to be desired figures during the fashion show and the beauty pageants. The transgender fashion shows allied to the queer cultural festival and the first ever beauty contest Queen of Dhwaya 2017 for transgenders have also been sensationalised by the new media as the brand new models of transgender emancipation.
Fig. 3- The pride parade in Kerala reported in print media.

The media representations capture queer pride parades and present in a way that, the parade and the events associated with it shake the hegemonic construction of gender and mobilise the support for pride, in taking the voice of the marginalised genders to the mainstream. Thus, the print and visual media mainstream transgender identities in Kerala and register a regional version that accords the transnational queer political activism.

The Left government in Kerala made several interventions to mainstream the transgender community in Kerala and push them to social participation through education and employment. A number of magazines and newspapers brought out news items that popularised the welfare schemes for transgenders by the government in Kerala. The leading local vernacular Mathrubhumi serialized transgender experiences. Articles in similar nature began to appear in certain other periodicals in the regional vernacular like Mangalam and Madhyamam too.
Fig.4- A few news clips from the Kerala dailies.

The instance when MtF Deepthi Kalyani became the cover girl of a widely spread women’s magazine, Vanitha, a news portal observed it as a move that “acknowledge(s) the identity of a third gender in public life” (“Historic! Kerala’s Vanitha Features a Transgender on its Cover”). In the cover page itself the magazine claimed it as historic another media endorsed the same. These were some of the more prominent instances of the media ensuring the visibility of transgenders in the public sphere and glossing it as their ‘coming out’.

Fig.5- Transgender Deepthi Kalyani as the cover girl of Vanitha.
What the media forget while reporting this is the fact that it has re-created the hetero-sexualised, normative image of an MtF for popular consumption when it sensationalised the emergence of the transwoman as the cover girl, terming it a milestone or achievement for the entire transgender community.

The Kerala society practices the hetero- sexual marriages and a family outside this structure never gained social sanction to exist. The MtF transgender people ostracized in their own families, thus found solace by migrating to urbane spaces in metro cities like Bombay, Kolkata, Bangalore, Hyderabad, etc. and lived there forming an alternative family system closely following certain rules (Nanada, Reddy, Resmi & Anil Kumar). A major event that captured the media attention in Kerala is the transgender marriages happened in 2018. Two transsexual couples married in the year and among them Surya and Ishaan, the MtF and FtM transsexuals and the event was celebrated by the media as it was the first of its kind and termed it a historic occasion.

![Fig.6 The first transgender marriage in the state, Surya-Ishaan exchange sweets](image)

However, it is to be noted that the couple conformed to the social construction of concepts of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ to get legal sanctity for their marriage though gender inversion
happened through surgical re-appropriation of their bodies. The transgender marriage was spotlighted in such a way that the discerning student of culture could discern the cultural matrix of the society, from the variety of spheres that are required to be renegotiated to give space to transgenders. Further, the transgender marriage becomes a trope for the hetero-sexualisation of transgendering as any close reading of the event would show. It was reported as a huge step for the trans community, who were hitherto denied happiness or opportunities (Balan), but it was in fact an act of mainstreaming the trans community, through a few modifications to the family as an institution of the society.

Like the pride parades, media is also engaged in recording two trans exhibitions happened in Kochin and Tiruvananthapuram as empowering and exploring transgender identities and their bodies. “Trans, a transition for life” and “Man, I am” interestingly depicted the queer bodies of Malayali transgenders. These exhibitions conducted in different cities offered glance at the transgender bodies, which become visual spectacles for the public. While it is seen as a protest and authentication of the trans-body through art, the positive media coverage these exhibitions gained, show the appreciation of the society as well as an acknowledgement of the trangenders living in Kerala.

Fig. 7-The posters of two transgender art-photo exhibitions in Kerala
It is pertinent to note that, “Man, I am” exclusively captured the life of FtM transgenders in Kerala by the press photographer P. Abhijith. “I am trying to introduce transmen into the society. After SRS surgery, transmen find it hard to get a job and also find it difficult to get acceptance in the society. I hope that the visibility received through the exhibition will help them get jobs” (“Lives of Transmen in Varied Hues”).

The visual media host a number of transgender programs, mostly talk shows and a few the product of investigative journalism. Those programs include “Moonnamlingakkarkku parayanullathu”- Sreekandan Nair Show, “Bhinnaralla Nammalarum”-Malayali Darbar, “Onnayaninneyiha Randennu Kandalavil”- Selfie, “JB Junction-Transgenders-Surya and Sheetal”, “Interview with Surya”, “Heart wrenching story of a Transgender”- D4 Dance Episode 1227, “Sthree Diamension”- Life of transgenders in social Kerala”, “Nerkkuner”, “Moonnamlingakkari Suji”- Kannadi, “Nianthanranarekha”- Malayala Manorama aired a few programs in the recent past that narrated the life of transgenders their cultural and social space in Kerala context. Initially, most of these programs were aired as lampoons and later the nature of them began to change with a shift in perspective. Programs like “Nerkazhcha”, in Amritha TV discussed how transgenders in Kerala are ostracized and denied the basic rights as human beings and citizens. Also the program sought an end of the lynching of transgenders by the police and the need for gender sensitization. All of these initiatives aimed at sensitizing the public sphere, empowering the transgender to speak out, to end the violence against them.

The paper would be examining the release and circulation of a transgender themed film *Njan Marykkutty* in 2018, and its popularity which renegotiated the transgender identity in the history of Malayalam Cinema. In the film, the transgender is celebrated as ‘Shero’ as a counter-discourse to the flaws in other minor transgender representations in Malayalam films so far.
The transgender character in the film emerges as a successful ‘person’ rather than a sexualised figure in the end. The media sensationalised the film as “a step into the world of transpeople and their mindscapes and their emotional and physical trauma” (Nagarajan 2018), and it was seen “to remove the myths and prejudices about transgender people to an extent” (Cris 2018).

Fig. 8&9 The poster of *Njan Marykkutty* (2018) and the ramp walk of the hero along with five transwomen celebrities in Kochi, during the audio launch of the film.

Though the popular support for a transgender lead character is sensationalised in the media as a huge success saga, it also makes the transgender a commodity. Following the release of the film, transgender groups, activists and the movie gazing public re-imagined transgenders as figures to be celebrated as the media reports concerned themselves with the cisgender actor who played the role visiting the legislators in the state, his interaction with transgenders aired in news channels as entertainment programs, the sensationalism of the launch of the trailers of the film - “it was released by five transwoman- makeup artist Renju Renjimar, IT Professional Zara Sheikh, entrepreneur Thripthy Shetty, social activist Sheethal Shyam and legal advisor Riya, at Lulu Fashion Week held in Lulu Mall, Kochi” (“Jayasurya’s Njan Marykkutti Trailer Out”). The excess in normalisation of the transgender ironically endorses the heterosexual values of the gender performance when the surgically re-appropriated body is celebrated, clapped at the big
screen and sensationalised as an achievement, as the central character voices the misconception that “I am not a transgender, I am transsexual”.

In the age of new media, social networking sites and blogs engage as mobilisers and support systems by giving space to transgenders. They are able to create a ripple in the queer temporality and space in Kerala. As CBOs, Queeralia and Queerrythm are working for the entire LGBTQI community living in Kerala and outside by preparing and publishing news concerned with non-normative identities. The freedom offered by the cyber platform is empowering for transgenders themselves as one’s face book pages can be used as a self-expression and empowerment. The cyber platforms cross the transnational boundaries and record the new queer history in Kerala.

The paper looked at the representation of transgender identities in Kerala and how they constitute narratives on transgenders in the contemporary times based on the media reports. The public sphere in Kerala is structured around the patriarchal values of gender performance, the role expectations from the society concerned with masculinity and femininity. Transgenders, being a `transgression` from the norm, was invizibilised and marginalised for a long time. The paradigm shift in the second decade of the twentieth century has seen the restructuring of the public sphere in a way that it welcomes the transgenders and accommodates them in the region. Different media in the state epitomise the transformation as the media give space to cover queer events, the visual space discusses and debates on transgender identities and their rights as citizens. The cyber platforms are creatively used to mobilize public support for transgender events and as a space for queer activism. Cinema in the region also reflects the shift in perspectives when it depicts transgender as the successful central figure. It is argued that though, the excess of heterosexualisation of the trans identities still persist, these media narratives form
the crux of the shifting trends of transgender representations from abject figures to *object petit a* or desired figures and records the queer temporality.

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Re-interpreting the Bard, From Kathakali to Kathaprasangam: Cultural Revisionings, Orality, and Theories of Spectatorship

Shilpa Sajeev

Abstract: Non-English performative adaptations of Shakespeare have continually ruptured the notion of a perceived universality in Shakespearean works often creating texts not frozen in time but malleable, and with distinctly local and contemporary flavours. My paper examines the curiously inter-genric and polyphonic nature of Shakespearean narratives adapted in India, particularly in Kerala. These sites of ‘transcreations’ and adaptations not only destabilise the cultural complex associated with Shakespeare but also conceive new forms of spectatorship and highlight, for example, the role of the ‘rasik’ through Indian aesthetics. How, for example, do these performances offer an almost erasure of textuality and veer into the realm of the oral and what is the changed role of the spectator in such transfigured spaces are some questions that will be explored. It will also take note of the process of “adaptation” reflecting upon its dual nature—firstly the act and process of adaptation itself and secondly the formation of the hybrid cultural product. The paper will also try to address the problems of intersemiotic translation when a primarily Western text gets translated into an Eastern language like Malayalam and when the literary work gets further adapted to the stage by analyzing how Shakespearean narratives get woven into forms as diverse as Kathakali and Kootiyattam to Kathaprasangams. The analysis will also take into account the myriad conditions that shaped the cultural milieu of the original, like questions of race and gender, and the concerns of the adapted work, factoring in the problems and anxieties about the original that have to be contended with in the process of ‘domestication’.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Kathakali, Kathaprasangam, performative, orality

Ben Jonson, in his Preface to the First Folio (1623), said of William Shakespeare, seven years after the Bard of Avon’s death, “his work was not of an age, but for all time”. The Shakespeare industry, thanks to the persistent teaching of English Literature in schools and universities, has continued to thrive albeit evolving constantly through its negotiations with hybridity and plurivocity. I use ‘hybridity’ to refer to the condition of crossbreeding or interaction between two things, which could be as complex as two cultures, that might seem disparate and distinct at first glance.
Although Shakespeare’s influence on the cultures and literatures of the world has transcended both time and space, the Bard owes his universality partly to the hegemony of the English language. In the last 400 years, critics have time and again, questioned the ‘timelessness’ attributed to the works of Shakespeare, highlighting that non-English adaptations of the Bard that have imbued this universality with new meanings that are polyphonic and culturally moulded. Shakespeare, therefore, seems to have become for ‘all time’, not quite in the sense of Jonson’s words, but enmeshed in discourses of hybridity and plurality.

The Shakespearean text, thanks to educational policies and other cultural interventions, becomes an inherited text that works itself into the cultural, literary, and artistic fabric of the receiving society. The inherited texts come to us in a certain way and the discourses surrounding their reception are also handed down to us. These texts and the discourses, if taken as a fait accompli, disallow the “fecundity of expression” with the illusion of pregiven meaning created by suppressing their historical and embodied state. This paper takes a look at the transition of this inherited source from the canon of literature, and drama to the realm of performance. This necessitates a close look at the performance, not from the perspective of a dramatic text, whose focus is on plot and characterisation, but at the conception of performance with its emphasis on “nowness”, body, and presence. But the instantiation of the performance is an act of resignification. To borrow Merleau-Ponty’s words, “[N]o established meaning of a term ever exhausts its meaning. Expression is never total but must always be sought for anew” and “as in the case of flesh and the expressive gestures which our common world of carnal intersubjectivity emerges from, the universal forms of signification in language do not arise from theoretical constructions or reside in dictionaries” (Merleau Ponty xxii). Through its creative vision, every performance suggests a resignification of meaning and a “continuous birth”. The
plot works merely as a source text, and the emphasis on the performative idioms that characterise the performance of these texts. I try to illustrate this through my analyses of Kathakali Othello and Sambasivan’s Kathaprasangam performance,

Non-English and performative adaptations of Shakespeare have regularly subverted this notion of universality in Shakespeare’s works to create texts not frozen in time, but malleable and distinctly local. These Shakespearean adaptations, far from being culturally frozen objects, arrested in time, can be viewed neither as discrete nor autotelic. To quote Margaret Jane Kidnie: they are not already-knowable objects "against which one can take the measure of its theatrical [or other] treatments," but rather "dynamic process(es) that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (Kidnie 2). They are to be approached as constantly evolving categories, located in the interstice between text and performance, script and drama, and arising out of the seams of the script-drama dyad\(^1\), as identified by Richard Schechner.

A recent memorable attempt at a reinterpretation of The Tempest was Abhilash Pillai’s Talatum that uses circus and other ‘subaltern’ forms to narrate its story. Talatum, with its minimal use of multi-lingual dialogue, places the body as the key-text in the performance. Not only debunking the hegemony of ‘text’ (in its Aristotelian sense) in performance, this writing away from the centre is also, in a manner, a disavowal of the cultural authority of both Shakespeare and English. Sycorax, the mother of Caliban and a native of the island, an unseen

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\(^1\) Richard Schechner’s work tries to, very effectively, deconstruct the non-neutral loaded notions of “script”, “theatre”, “drama”, and “performance”, that remain fundamental to any study of the larger umbrella-term performance. While “drama” refers to what the writer writes, the script makes for the interior map of the particular production that can be transmitted time to time and place to place. The “theatre” refers to the set of specific gestures performed by performers at any given point of time. And finally, the performance, an all-encompassing constellation of events includes the audience and performers and anybody who enters or exits the field of performance.
character in the Shakespearean text, is represented as a huge puppet. Her presence looms large throughout the performance, spotlighting questions on ownership, authenticity, and cultural appropriation.

My paper examines the cultural underpinnings involved when Shakespearean narratives get adapted in India, particularly in Kerala, and the inter-genric and polyphonic nature of this process. These new sites of transcreations and adaptations not only destabilize the cultural complex associated with Shakespeare but also conceive new forms of spectatorship, highlighting the role of the ‘rasik’ is an interesting case in point, through Indian aesthetics. The classic definition of adaptation, “the process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment” can be applied to texts as well as the text changes to suit different conditions. Sisir Kumar Das writes:

The reception of Shakespeare in India, here deep and pervasive, there scanty and spare, is as complex and problematic as the story of the Western impact on Indian literature itself. We do not know the precise number of translations of Shakespearean texts in different Indian languages. … These translations which also included adaptations of various kinds, coincided with the growth of a new narrative and dramatic literature in different Indian languages. Some of them were inspired by a growth of a new theatre distinct from the performing traditions of precolonial India. In other words, the Indian encounter with Shakespeare is an essential part of the history of Indian literary transformation in the last century” (Das 47).

This is especially true of Kerala whose literary and dramatic sphere in the late nineteenth century was heavily influenced by Shakespeare, and a plethora of translations and reworkings of the
Bard appeared. Shakespearean plays like The Taming of the Shrew were adapted to the Kerala stage as *Kalahinidamanakam* by Kandathil Varghese Mappillai. Following which other translations of Shakespeare like *King Lear* and *Hamlet* by A Govinda Pillai appeared. The Merchant of Venice came to Malayalam as Portia Swayamvaram in 1884 and The Tempest as Sunanda Sarasaveeram by D. Govindan. As Andre Lefevere suggests in his work “Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature”,

> the degree to which the foreign writer is accepted in the native system will be determined by the need that native system has of him in a certain phase of its evolution”. These works gain new understanding and meaning, through the “refractions”\(^2\) and “rewritings” that transport literature from one system to another (Lefevere 23).

These performances served as reworkings of the originals rather than translations, for they evoked the unique flavour and sensibility of Kerala. Thus, the “adaptation” functions on two levels - firstly the act and process of adaptation itself and secondly the formation of the hybrid cultural product.

Similarly, education imparted largely through English colleges ensured changing cultural idioms. With the setting up of courts in every district, and clubs ushered in a new class that read and discussed Western literature and read European novels. Plays like Ibsen’s Ghosts, Rosmersholm, The Power of Darkness, The Rivals, Oedipus were translated into Malayalam, helping breathe new life into Malayalam drama. Shaping a new literary public sphere and the renaissance of Malayalam literature, as E V Ramakrishnan and others pointed out happened

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\(^2\) Andre Lefevre uses the term “refractions” to talk of adaptations of one work of literature into another. He suggests that they work as a compromise between the two systems and serve as an indicator of the constraints of these systems.
largely through the process of translation. He suggests that “the radicalisation of literary
discourse during this phase of Malayalam literature was largely achieved through the agency of
translation” (Ramakrishnan 1).

The adaptation of Shakespearean texts into the lexis of Kathakali offers interesting
insights into the way the Bard has been hybridized and projected on the Indian stage. My paper
analyses Sadanam Balakrishnan’s production of Othello (1989), which was one of the foremost
attempts at narrating a ‘videshi’ (foreign) story through the aesthetic language of Kathakali. As
Ania Loomba suggests, while considering a site specific, reconfiguring Indian production as
Othello in the Kathakali style of dance-drama, “any meaningful discussion of colonial or post-
colonial hybridities demands close attention to the specificities of location as well as a
conceptual re-orientation which requires taking on board non-European histories and modes of
representation” (Loomba 144). A brief outline of Kathakali, one of the more famous artistic
modes of representation, is necessary for a better understanding of the hybridization of
Shakespeare in post-colonial India.

Kathakali as an art form emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and was
performed in the temple precincts of Kerala. Historically, Kathakali has been perceived as an
elitist art form rooted in feudal regimes. The performances in this dance-drama tradition are
usually versions of episodes from the Indian epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) or stories from
the puranas. In the words of Phillip Zarrilli:

Rather, kathakali ‘exists’ as a set of potentialities inherent in the complex set of practices,
texts, discourses, representations, and constraints through which it is constantly
negotiated and (re)created by means of ‘tactical improvisation’ (Jenkins 1992:51), both
As one would know, a connoisseur of Kathakali does not attend a Kathakali performance to ‘know’ the story of say, Kalyanasougandikam or a Kiratarjuniyam, for the stories are familiar to most of the audience. But these are well-loved tales that are made anew through performances by the maestros. The performance achieves fame through the distinctive elements lend to the story by the performers in their veshams and hence, a Karnan by Kalamandalam Gopi, a Nalan by Krishnan Nair, or Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair’s Bali becomes memorable. Each performance of the same story is made unique through elaboration, individual technique, subtleties in music and costume. This scope for elaboration, whether performative or narrative, is owing to the literary richness in the attakathas, which are often studied for their poetic and literary merit.

Over the past years, Kathakali performances have displayed experimentation in both content and technique, be it in the staging of the art form outside its traditional setting or in the use of unconventional texts, including the production of iconoclastic pieces like The Killing of Hitler, Gandhi’s Victory, or People’s Victory. This kind of experimentation can also be located in the context of the theatre of roots propagated by Suresh Awasthi, Kavalam Narayana Panikker, and Habib Tanvir in the 1960s. The thanathu nadakam or indigenous mode of drama by Kavalam Naarayana Panikker and C N Sreekantan Nair was developed with the aim of creating a new lexis for Malayalam theatre, separate from the heavily Western influenced idiom that Malayalam theatre was used to. This “going back to the roots” integrated Kerala’s traditional

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3 These pieces, most notably People’s Victory which was hugely popular with the audience, were conscious attempts at politicizing Kathakali and countering its imperialist roots. Produced by left-leaning fronts such as the Kerala Kalabhavan, these productions were overtly political in nature. Aricatasumedharan, a critic reads “the production(s) as bringing kathakali ‘down’ from the lofty place of appreciation among Kerala’s high-caste traditional patrons (‘the palaces of rajas and kings’… to ‘the common people’ such as the workers of the Communist Party and members of the Agricultural Workers Union, etc. (Zarrilli qtd Aricatasumedharan 196).
forms like Padayani and Theyyam and martial art forms like Kalari Payattu.

To return to the postcolonial adaptations of Shakespeare, the 1989 Kathakali production *King Lear*, for example, by Keli (Paris) and Kerala Kalamandalam can be read as an act of intercultural communication: an attempt to familiarize the Eastern art form to a Western audience, while keeping the technique and structure intact. The experimentation, with Annette Leday and some prominent Kalamandalam artistes, sought to make accessible the form of Kathakali to Western audience, who were familiar with the Shakespearean texts. According to LeDay and McRuvie, “kathakali’s ‘rich means of expression and its intensity of effect’ seemed an appropriate performative means through which to ‘find a theatrical expression for the larger-than-life dimension and explosive power of the play’ (Zarrilli qtd in LeDay and McRuvie 1989 184). The performance also led to several controversies such as the propriety of the ‘kathi’ vesham, instead of the *pacha* role assigned to King Lear. Similarly, to portray his final wretchedness and his absolute ‘nakedness’, Lear removes his crown or *kireetam* on-stage, something unthinkable in the lexis of Kathakali leading one to wonder whether the performance could have done without this particular nuance. Thus, this daunting inter-cultural task of transforming a non-Indian, non-epic text into an Indian classical art-form is compromised by the bindings of structural and cultural conventions. The Kathakali artiste is situated not in a cultural vacuum but carries with him the “paradigmatic past”, that is present as “he approaches any important role on stage” (Zarilli 190).

Diane Daugherty, speaking of *King Lear* in Kathakali, claims that the first step in such a production involves “transforming the abundant narrative of a Shakespearean tragedy to the focused intensity required of a kathakali plot” (Daugherty 57). This transformation, apart from the aspect of practicality and convenience, is an active act of interpretation. Scenes that represent
a universalist aesthetic discourse are selected for dramatic effect and the performance is mostly
devoid of the political underpinnings of the original text. Through the careful dilutions of the
material and social conditions that were characteristic of the Western text (Eagleton 284-85)
what emerges is a stark storyline whose *stoff*’s or themes are passion, ambition, and jealousy.

This adaptation generates inflections that are starkly different from the original, liminally
located at the interstices of the inter-cultural communication —neither *videshi*, nor entirely *desi*.
One, then, needs to reformulate the lens through which such a performance with intercultural
underpinnings is viewed. Kathakali works on the premise of good and evil and each character
has to fit into a pre-determined mould. Kathakali performances generally use mythological
characters in the natyadharmi mode. The *natyadharmi* or the ‘conventional’ mode of acting is the
presentation of a play through the use of stylized gestures and symbolism and was considered
more artistic than realistic. *Lokadharmi* (realistic), meanwhile, involves the reproduction of
human behaviour on the stage and the natural presentation of objects. Showing deaths on stage is
unusual in traditional Indian theatre, but when Othello, the ‘noble’ prince murders the virtuous
heroine on-stage, the princely Othello is transformed into an ordinary human being—a husband
consumed by rage and jealousy—delineating the *lokadharmi* element of the performance. This
perhaps is also a marker of the very evolution of the art form of Kathakali: the response of a
traditional art form to the colonial narrative. But this version of Othello does not seek to
dramatically restructure or even retell, but perhaps actualise through the gestural and the facial
grammar of a four-hundred-year old art form, a non-Indian narrative.

This adaptation and revisioning suggests a shift from the word to the gestural through this
pre-dramatic form. But this is not uncomplicated in its conceptions. In the inter-genric context, it
becomes an essaying of the emotional, and an evocation of *rasas*, rather than of the undercutting
currents of racism and class relations. Othello, in the Sapanam Balakrishnan’s version becomes a *pacha* character modelled after the warrior prince Nala of Nalcharitha. In this interesting encounter between a centuries-old foreign text and an even older classical art form like Kathakali, what emerged was a curious inter-cultural hybrid that go beyond boundaries of convenient binaries like black/white, traditional/modern, or colonial/indigenous.

Transposing the postcolonial concerns from a western dialectic might not be useful in fruitfully engaging with the language of Kathakali, a pitfall that can be observed in Ania Loomba’s reading of the Sadanam Balakrishnan’s version of Kathakali, where she misses the resonance of the ‘outcast’ that replaces the moor of the original, as pointed out by Poonam Trivedi and Rustom Bharucha. Any such analysis, while taking into account the myriad conditions that shaped the cultural milieu of the original, must concern itself with the specificities of the adapted work and the target language, and factor in the problems and anxieties about the original that need to be contended within the process of adaptation.

How, then, does the inter-semiotic adaptation work while using the performative lens of a traditional form? What does it mean for Othello’s character to be essayed in the role of a Nala-like character? How does an Othello fit into the idiom of the Kathakali performance? What happens to his Moorish status? Or does a form like the elite Kathakali, ironically enough, erase the inherent racial hegemonies that were present in the original form for the playing out of individual agonies in the aesthetic space?

Rustom Bharucha points out that “the debate on caste as race is beginning to enter the political discourse of the Indian subcontinent, but it has not yet entered the hermeneutics of traditional performance.” The production, however, is not entirely ignorant of Othello’s
blackness, for his hands are painted black. However, one cannot discount the fact that the notion of blackness in India is very different from the Western perception of blackness. The accent on the blackness cannot be thus seen as entirely hinging upon the issue of race. One might argue that in the symbolic repertoire of Kathakali, the blackness of his hands that replaces Shakespeare’s ‘sooty bosom’, could forebode the impending horrific act (bhayanaka-inducing) he is going to commit.

The Kathakali repertoire usually relies on the binaries of good and evil (gods and demons), and characters usually essay roles as either heroes or villains. One has to agree that the Kathakali performance is highly depoliticized. While neutralising the concerns of race, and class, present in the original text, on the one hand, Othello becomes a nayaka of nobler qualities, a pacha Hindu warrior prince character whose murder of Desdemona is a crime of passion. Phillip Zarrilli explains:

Literally, ‘green,’ this class of make-up/characters includes divine figures like Krishna and Vishnu, kings like Rugmamgada, and epic heroes such as Rama and Bhima. The most refined among male characters, they are upright, moral, and ideally full of a calm inner poise— ‘royal sages’ modelled on the hero (nayaka) of Sanskrit drama whose task is to uphold sacred law (Zarrilli 248).

Here, Othello turns out to be neither ‘moral’ nor ‘upright’, and falters from upholding the sacred law as his jealousy makes him commit the heinous crime of murdering his wife. Iago, on the other hand, becomes a kathi character. Even while sticking to archetypes of the pacha and the kathi, the journey of the character’s transformation is delineated through the complex of bhavas (expressions) manifest in the crescendo leading to the final murder scene, the murder of a
minukku nayika⁴ by a pacha nayakan, something extremely alien to the Kathakali idiom. The words of Desdemona’s father in the Senate, “thathane chathichaval pathiyeyum chathikkum” (The one who betrayed her father, will betray her husband too”), rings as a portent of the tragedy that is to befall them. The action on-stage is supplemented by a singing that draws on the Carnatic style of music. The attakkatha (an enacted story), narrating the story, is thus sung in Sanskritised Malayalam in accompaniment to the chenda, maddalam, and edakka⁵.

To shift the focus from the politics of the narrative to its aesthetics, abhinaya, which literally means to ‘carry forward’, is a bridge between performer and audience that helps deliver the appropriate essence (rasa) to the audience. Rasa, ‘that which can be tasted’, is what is generated as the outcome of the complex interplay between the “vibhava [stimulus], anubhava [involuntary reaction], and vyabhicari bhava [voluntary reaction]” (Bharatamuni 54). Abhinaya, through its intricate complex of gesture, movement, and expression becomes a crucial element in the theatrical efficacy of the performance and an instantiation of body memory. As Schechner succinctly puts it, “an aesthetic founded on rasa is fundamentally different than one founded on the ‘theatron,’ the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic.” It is therefore pointing towards a methodology of understanding Performance in terms of patterns of “doing” rather than modes of “thinking”; the form becomes more important than content, particularly in the Eastern context. Schechner writes:

Rasic performance values immediacy over distance, savoring over judgment. Its

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⁴ A minukku nayika is a heroine of noble qualities, usually chaste and blameless. Here Desdemona is presented as a virtuous woman. Her death becomes problematic for two reasons, firstly for the depiction of death, and that too of a woman on stage, and secondly because of her death at the hands of the hero.

⁵ They are various types of drums used in Kathakali and other folk music forms traditional to Kerala.
paradigmatic activity is a sharing between performers and partakers (a more accurate term than “audiences” or “spectators,” words that privilege ear or eye). The rasic performance event is more a banquet than a day in court (Schechner 31).

The form of Kathakali perhaps cannot fully articulate the different accents of *Othello*. As Ania Loomba notes, one might wonder if a form like Kathakali can fruitfully engage with Shakespearean texts and use it to its full potential (Loomba 162). However, what should also be remembered is that the pre-dramatic form of Kathakali relies on a different text, the text of the body to spin its own narrative, and evincing how the form itself has evolved and taken its place in the postcolonial moment.

An interesting parallel to the Shakespearean adaptations in Kathakali is V Sambasivan’s use of the Bard’s text in his Kathaprasangams, which are more democratic and vibrant in their encounters. Kathaprasangams have a unique position as one of the few forms of oral traditions that have survived into the twentieth century. ‘Katha’- ‘prasangam’, literally meaning story-speech, traces its origins from the Harikatha or Ramakatha, forms of devotional story-telling, before it became more secular and vernacular. While the general structure of the performance resembling a congregation with one man addressing the crowd has been retained, the themes of these performances have moved away from the religious and the didactic to occupy more secular themes. They are exemplars of oral artistry narrating stories where a single performer enacts all the characters in the story, irrespective of age or gender. They are a unique blend of music and story-telling, usually performed for hundreds of people at fairs and festivals.

This form of storytelling instantiates the oral origins of theatre and the performance is punctuated with both songs in accompaniment to musical instruments like the Tabla and the
cymbal for the highpoints in the story. Minimalist props are used, with little or no costume changes excepting simple devices like a hand towel or a handkerchief to distinguish between characters. The performer uses “sookshma-abhinaya”, minute but varied gestural and facial techniques to essay the characters, as Sanju Thomas notes in her piece “The Moor for the Masses”. It is also a re-instantiation of memory that is so fundamental to oral narratives. The performer, for example, is not prompted from the wings unlike what might happen on an Elizabethan stage.

Sambasivan has adapted the Shakespearean texts like *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet* into the oral form of Kathaprasangam. Through these Kathaprasangams, the Shakespearean texts spilled out of their traditional proscenium theatres to be juxtaposed with a form of oral ballads that was familiar to village audiences. Thus, creating an aesthetic democratic space and dismantling the hegemony of the figure of authority that was Shakespeare. Drawing from the repertoire of stories ranging from doyens of Malayalam literature like Thakazhi and Kesava Dev to Chekhov and Shakespeare, Sambasivan’s recitals not only took Malayali literary figures to the public but helped familiarize foreign literatures to the masses. In fact, his influence and popularity was much so that Director Jayaraaj, whose National-award winning film *Kaliyattam* which was a retelling of Othello, credits Sambasivan for having introduced him to Shakespeare. Thus the *videshi* Shakespeare becomes the *desi* Shakespeare, known and beloved by the audience. One can witness here, as Rustom Bharucha points out, a playing out of the performative energies between the Asian traditions and the ‘Elizabethan Playhouses’ (Bharucha 2).

How do these performances then offer an almost erasure of textuality and veer into the realm of the oral? What is the changed role of the spectator in such transfigured spaces? Oral
traditions have always permeated the performative landscapes of Asia, right from the pre-literate times and have continued to survive into the twentieth century, evolving and transforming while assimilating the zeitgeist. As Poonam Trivedi notes, “As a matter of fact, all the three stages of orality as identified by Walter J. Ong in Orality and Literacy, “primary” of preliterate cultures, “residual” of the transitional stage and “secondary” of the contemporary age of electronic media dependent on print, may be traced in India in different parts of the country, existing, at times, simultaneously.” (Trivedi 7) The performative, the narrative, and the musical articulations, issued forth by the body become instantiations of memory. Bardic singer-poets have been a ubiquitous presence, ranging from the Manganiyaars of Rajasthan to Bauls of Bengal to the Paanans of Kerala, nomadic singers who sing popular ballads. She also suggests that in this context, Sambasivan may be seen as a “modern version of an ancient rhapsode”. She writes:

Sambasivan’s primarily aural performance was able to stitch together the orality and music of the katha tradition to Shakespeare’s words and poetry, unifying and harmonising these diverse elements for his audiences. With no distraction of movement or visuality, the oral dramatization and singing concentrated greater attention on the words and their intonation, pitch and emotion with which they were inflected (Trivedi 10).

In Kerala, forms like the kathaprasangams have co-existed with the traditionally temple-art forms like Kathakali and Kootiyattam. Unlike the detailed nuances of Kathakali, whose understanding requires a prerequisite level of the aesthetic tradition, the aesthetic space of kathaprasangam is distinctly democratic in its appeal and has also been used as a vehicle of social propaganda to mobilise masses. These performances can, then, be seen as a reclamation of Shakespeare’s appeal to the masses. For in the colonies, he would be seen as a figure of cultural
authority but when in fact, Shakespeare has been a playwright of the hoi polloi, in the non-pejorative use of the term.

While the performances introduced Shakespeare to the suburban masses, they also played a pedagogic role, much like the jatra performances of Shakespeare by Utpal Dutt. Tapati Gupta in “From Proscenium to Paddy Fields” writes of Dutt’s productions:

Dutt attempted to further develop the performance of jatra and initiated, by subtle means, a change in the taste and education of the rural and mofussil (suburban) audiences. Therefore, one may well presume that his Shakespeare jatra demystified Shakespeare for non-elite audiences, making this folk form more sensitive to more subtle localised nuances. (Gupta 165)

And much like Utpal Dutt, one can argue that Sambasivan’s performances too had a socio-economic accent, whose conceptual framework was distilled out of his Leftist ideologies. Thus, by reclaiming Shakespeare’s mass appeal, Sambasivan not only “demystified” the poet but also made it accessible by affording an element of contemporariness to the performances.

Sambasivan’s Othello is more or less a faithful translation of the Shakespearean text. Lasting a little over an hour, the performance is interspersed with song, and is an apt mix of colloquial and poetic Malayalam. This classic mélange has perhaps aided in endearing his performances to the masses. With impeccable comic timing, he infuses both wit and humour in the performance, drawing many a chuckle from the audience. One might argue that the heaviness associated with watching a tragedy like Othello is ostensibly made lighter through Sambasivan’s characteristic brilliance. His leftist progressivism shines through his performance, as Trivedi notes:
His progressivism is seen in the open sympathy for the women in the play: not only is Desdemona beauty and perfection incarnate and Emilia, the loyal and sensible one, Bianca too is elevated and dignified. She is compared to Vasavadutta, the lovelorn courtesan heroine of Malayalam poet Kumaran (sic) Asan’s well-known poem of the same name, who falls in love with the client/hero (Trivedi 14).

Further, through this recalling of the popular image of Kumaran Asan’s Vasavadatta, Sambasivan is tapping into the psyche of his Malayalam audience, actively reinterpreting and adapting the Western narrative to the local idiom and flavor of Kerala. Similarly, Sambasivan does not shirk away from addressing the issue of race. Othello’s otherness is established at the very outset of the play as he sympathetically narrates Othello’s former life as a slave and his struggles through his rise to power. Brabantio on finding Othello after Desdemona’s elopement, addresses him as a ‘karumban’ (a black man), who ought to be hanged. Desdemona is praised as the epitome of virtue and of whose “radiance he marks sympathetically and poetically as “Amavasi” versus “Purnima”, “moonless night” juxtaposed with the “full moon night” in comparison to Othello (Trivedi 14).

The text undergoes alteration at different levels—Shakespeare himself derived his stories from various sources—from English language to Malayalam, from verse to prose, from high culture (in a postcolonial sense) to popular art. Thus, this intersemiotic process demonstrates that through specific configurations of selective suppression, a story set in a different time and distant place converses with the essential local milieu. These adaptations and appropriations range from the dance form of Kathakali to oral forms like the thullal and Kathaprasangams delineating the

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6 The passage of the literary text from one sign system to another.
different modes of receptions in the postcolonial moment.

Such revisionings seem to be sceptical of the notion of ‘modernity’ which is as a Western import, and explores the question of what ‘modernity’ really means in the Indian context. To quote Ania Loomba:

One of the paradoxes that most defines colonialist regimes is the fact that despite the colonizers efforts to ‘civilize’ their ‘others’, and to fix them into perpetual ‘otherness’, the works of foreign art thrust into the consciousness of the colonized themselves catalyse and generate crossovers (Loomba 144).

They delineate the complexities of the revisionings in terms of borrowings with differences, and not merely a dislocation of texts resonating Partha Chatterjee’s argument of the complicated nature of our nationalisms. They are negotiations with the different notions of modernity that have seeped unevenly into the fabric of the modern nation-state. They are responses to the very specific demands of the locale.

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Marji in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*: An Un-childlike Child and the Interpretative Fictionalizing by the Child

Rahul Kamble

**Abstract:** A work of fiction by adults, which deals with a child, mainly portrays the child as a secondary subject. The writer always owns the primary subject as well as the agency on behalf of a child. These fictional worlds of children are created with a strategy of continuous memorizing and retrospective idealizing. As the adult world is full of adversities, contradictions, anxieties, and treachery, adult writers find the fantastically dreamy, pure, innocent, and relaxed world realizable, imaginatively, in children’s portrayals. Children in such works are ideally placed. Even when they are supposed to face issues they come out or are made to come out successfully on the basis of their given virtues such as innocence, adventurism, and imagination. Certain qualities with which the children protagonists in such works are endowed with are ideal universals. As the child in such fiction is a tool to complete the adult fancy about past and future, we hardly find childhood questioning or confronting us. This idealistic fictionalization or interpretation of a child is however problematized at multiple levels in Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis*.

Instead of a child so objective, distant, and divested of any independent childhood ideology, Marji, the child protagonist, is not only active and imaginative but interpretative of the historical past and present and re-inscribes herself on those sites wherefrom she was forced to leave. Instead of preferring to portray her as a paternalised, super-prescripted, and manoeuvred child Satrapi portrays her to be experimental, skeptical, and oriented towards the undiscovered-self. Satrapi’s portrayal of Marji is problematized by her inevitable autobiographical desire to re-inscribe her own body by creating the textual space replacing the Iranian space where she was removed from.

**Keywords:** children’s fiction, *Persepolis*, manoeuvred portrayal, experimental portrayal

The manner of child’s imagining, dreaming, fantasizing, fictionalizing and narrating is different from the adults. Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* best exemplifies child’s desire for fiction and the process of fictionalizing the real. But both are problematized in *Persepolis* as she is positioned to fiction with the triple force of “witnessing” the violence and trauma, the burden of “not forgetting” her family history, and her “re-drawing” her own body as a child. *Persepolis* historicizes all—“witnessing,” “not forgetting,” and “re-drawing”—in child’s narrative. Her fictionalizing takes place in her dreams of desiring to be a prophet; to shouting at God for his failure to protect her uncle Anoosh. The heard account of Ahmadi’s torture makes her imagine and draw a neat and symmetrical image of Ahmadi’s tortured and severed body into pieces.
unlike a real horrible image. Her witnessing the bombing, listening the political horrors, wishing for cigarette is mingled together to create a past-present-personal-political spectrum of illustration.

Marji’s narrative is deliberately fraught with the disjunctures created due to horror, trauma and terror to differ it from the normalized child-like fictionalizing. This paper proposes to examine some of these issues in the graphic novel Persepolis. (494 words)

The child in adults-written fiction for children appears to be the subject of these works, but only initially. Despite the attempts by the adult writer to give the child the space, agency, and language, the child is subsumed in the larger framework by and for adults, and the child protagonist is reduced to becoming a mere vehicle for carrying out the task of his/her composer. These nuanced patterns of child behaviour of the fictional children characters/protagonists are ‘normalised’ in the sense that they are tamed fictionally to fulfill their role which the writer wishes to assign them or carry through them. Un-contained, un-directional (not directionless), and un-oriented childhood often gets contained, directed and oriented in adult fictional narratives and this results in fictional closure of childhood, and this reduction is not truly mimetic of real life. The other major narrative strategy is alienating them from the adult “us”. Jack Zipes, reviewing Elke Liebs’s book says, “In other words, the child has become an alien figure and, as part of the unknown, children are threatening and must be controlled, cast away, or punished without guilt feelings on our part.” (Zipes 502) In consonance with this are portrayals and images of children in nineteenth century English literature influenced by catechist literature for children. Wordsworth and Blake’s opposition to such conception of childhood and their portrayals is well known. Allan Richardson comments on Wordsworth’s protest —
Wordsworth protests against the ideological construction of childhood by envisioning an ideology-proof, organic sensibility; a move which, while it attests to his profound dissatisfaction with contemporary educational methods (expressed at greater length in Book Five of The Prelude), tends to leave the child unsocialized and frozen in a state of eternal innocence (one reason why Wordsworthian children of nature like Lucy Gary or the Boy of Winander must die so early). (861)

Another difficulty we encounter is the stereotype - a “common childhood” with common traits. Heather Montgomery in her seminal work An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children’s Lives denies such uniform and blanket view that “child’s progress to adulthood being a replication of the primitive savage’s journey to becoming civilized.” (Roberts 130)

Creating children’s world in fiction is another challenge for the adult writer. It will definitely be a memorized or retro-imagined world, often coloured by the prescriptive wish for the children in future. Memorizing is a continuous ensemble and it is difficult to recover the memories which are unaffected by the present adult burden of memorizing. Adult memorizing has directions, intensities, recurrences, and functions. The unbroken continuity with the past and future complicates what is memorized. Adult writers have difficulty negotiating with this phenomenon. Another dimension that intervenes the portrayal is incorporation of adversities, hardships, risks, and dangers involved in adults’ life and discourse. It is virtually impossible to find any serious discourse on human life without the pain and anxiety that marks a large part of adult life. Adults’ concerns, discourses, and priorities are, and need to be, different from the children’s concerns, their articulations, and the resolutions of their concerns. These concerns too vary and are in constant flux as they grow and are exposed to everything that is new to them. For
adults, things are settled, so to speak, and there is little to be learnt from the common stock of knowledge and beliefs. In being turned into a subject of the state, the adult has been fully shaped to function as a ‘normal’ ‘sane’ human, and there is no scope for further learning. Herein lies the challenge for those writing children’s fiction: Do they take one of the limbs of the established binaries, which appear easy and pregiven? Or do they challenge these binaries in an effort to move beyond them? A writer could put the child in a dream-like situation where he/she has dream-like fantastic qualities and perform fantastic things and win battles which the author did not win for himself/herself. By doing so the writer may satisfy his/her own sense of unexplored corner or domain of childhood as well as afford pleasure of that domain to the reader; he/she may be advising the child reader to explore the domain and fulfill the childhood in ways different from the author’s own early life. This vicarious fulfilling of the unfulfilled desires is one of the shaping influences in children’s writings. The second way would be to subject the child to such horrified, magnified, isolated and intensified adverse situations so as to build expectations of heroism from him/her. The child’s battle would obviously bring up the necessary heroism quotient in the narrative. Such a portrayal of child would be fantastic feast for the readers both the adults as well as the children. This would be an ideal portrayal as it is an ideal predicament any individual would desire. The child protagonist deserves the accolade for being a child and facing the adult odds fiercely. But then it is forcing the adulthood onto the child by exorcising his or her childhood and changing the nature of childhood adventures. Even while portraying the individual children characters in terms of their behavioural aspects the description would lead to the inevitability of their being virtuous, innocent, and inadvertently adventurous as opposed to the unscrupulousness, unresponsiveness, and passivity of the adults. This binarism is convenient for affording some pleasure to the readers. If the two ways of fictionalizing children are taken for
granted then the tacit acceptance of the adult order by the child or objection to it is still designed and controlled by adults. We need to understand the impossibility of escaping the adult subjection, or the willingness to unlearn adult knowledge, in order to regain the child subjectivity. Even if it were to be achieved, it would still be a regained, secondary subject and not the unmediated state that is desired by the progressive author. The basic question, therefore, remains unanswered—how a child subject, a physio-psychological state that is independent of adult burden of subjectivity, could be achieved in fiction.

Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel Persepolis is an earnest attempt at recovering and maintaining the child and childhood. The child Marjane wants to imitate adults, a natural wish by any child. She puts this dream into effect on her own by smoking a cigarette, wearing a denim jacket, etc., as against the urge deployed in and through the fictionalized child to remain a child to maintain the blissful phase. Her protesting against her Principal is a reflection of her parents’ legacy of protesting. Marji’s idea of religion and the god is something to reflect upon. She admits that “Deep down I was very religious. But as a family we were very modern and avant-garde. I was born with a religion.” (Satrapi 6-7) The five panels in which she limns her inclination towards religion need special mention. In the first panel she shows the split in her family at the background. In the second, her conditioning by birth. But after that, the successive panels show her child-like but individual, firm and reasoned desire to become a prophet. Her maintenance of a holy book and codification of laws for humanity is an imitation of the adult God’s scripture and the practice of having disciples. It is less a spiritual submission than the child imitation of adults’ actions, including religion. She imitates the curing power of the God. She wants to be a prophet because she wants her maid to eat at a table with others, she wants that no old person should suffer as well as to celebrate the “traditional zarathustrian holidays” (6-7). However, the
conditioning that god cannot be challenged, whatever the gravity of one’s situation, is yet to dawn on her. She shouts at Him when she is convinced that he has failed to rescue her Anoosh Uncle from the fearful death. God’s temporal inability is unbelievable and results in His shocking exit. Rather than convincing herself that God works in mysterious ways, she reacts angrily to His inability:

Marji: Everything will be alright …

God: Marji, what seems to be the problem?

Marji: Shut up, You! Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again! Get out! (70)

Panels showing the uneasy talk between her and the prophet trace the abrupt end of their friendship and the beginning of her isolation.

Her reaction to the forced war, “[T]he second invasion in 1400 years! My blood was boiling. I was ready to defend my country against these Arabs who kept attacking us. I wanted to fight,” is not a nationalistic heroic sentiment but resentment against a forced war (79). For children the discourse of martyrdom is incomprehensible. Later at school, when their teacher asks them to write a report on war, her friend Paradise too reveals this lack of comprehension clearly rather than being consumed by the heroic rhetoric about war. Paradise articulates her inability to cope with the loss of her father to the war, “I wish he were alive and in jail rather than dead and a hero” (86).

Marji’s initiation into adulthood is fraught with difficulties. She resists being groomed into a “duty-bound” good citizen or an “obedient child” who should be lightening the burden of her parents in difficult times. Her defiance of her mother’s authority, her smoking episodes, are a parallel, if private, rebellion. Her stubbornness, which would trouble not only her but her parents, is “essential” for her in future. Her mother’s misgivings about her character — “sometimes it
scares me how blunt she is,” is seen as a sign of hope: “It’ll help her later on. You’ll see” (119). Marji rejects the clichéd parental views in favour of her own voice and stance.

The section “Kim Wilde” reverses the child-parent equation. As soon as the borders of Iran are reopened her parents rush for the passport to grab an opportunity to travel abroad at least to Turkey to spend some time together away from Iran. This visit to Turkey, instead of Europe, is ridiculed by Marji, much as the way an adult would ridicule a child’s rushing for whatever is available. Her demand list includes “denim jacket, chocolates, two posters— of Kim Wilde and Irom Maiden”; the last of it is ridiculed by her mother but supported by her father. While in Turkey her parents buy the posters, but they find it difficult to see the posters through the customs in Iran. Her mother conceives a childish plan. She tears his overcoat open from inside and hides the two posters. They successfully manage to dupe the customs. The child in the parents and the daughter is quite alive and reciprocal. When Marji wears the denim jacket with a Michael Jackson button and goes outside to buy tapes of Kim Wilde and Camel, she is spotted by the two guardians of revolution. Their job is “to arrest women who were improperly veiled” and “to put them back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women.” Marji is really in trouble. However, her cleverly managed feigned ignorance rescues her from the clutches of the guardians. The ‘kidding’ of Marji and her parents is a comic interlude in an otherwise grim reality of everyday. The child in Persepolis is a grim necessity for survival, not something that operates naturally. The instances of their kiddish behavior are tragic and ironic responses to the authoritative control of the personal domains of life. While the child in Marji’s parents help them dupe the vigilant customs, the child in Marji helps her claim innocence, distinguished from the adults’, in the eyes of the guardians. This kiddishness is further heightened through her rebelliousness. There are two instances: her slapping the Principal of her
school, and her counter-narratives on the existence and the fate of political prisoners at the new school. The two instances evoke a mixed response from her parents. The two instances are woven into a strand to show a natural pattern of growing.

Marji’s spirit remains unperturbed in a society that is coercive and totalitarian. She enjoys the unperturbed childhood agency from the beginning, in an ivory-tower world of her own making. She lives up her childhood, dreaming, imitating, imagining, reacting, rationalizing, or philosophizing. The adult Marjane’s (the author’s) perspective is carefully prevented from intruding upon the child Marji’s voice or point of view. She gives her parents’ teachings due consideration, without, however becoming a model submissive child, one who allows the difficult circumstances to curb her autonomy. The writer relieves little Marji of the burden of choice: carrying the legacy of her parents forward or submitting to the Islamic law of the State. The freedom which is allowed to her helps her discover the life as she best as she can. It helps the child Marji in two ways—she is free from familial, cultural, and political external agencies of control; she is also free from any futuristic burden. By not making Marji an ideal child hero, the child Marji is also divested off the author’s burden.

Children have a desire to fiction and display varied patterns in fictionalizing. This desire however is problematized by his/her socio-cultural, political or historical positioning. Alice’s desire to fictionalize the real characters in her dream is narrativised by Lewis Carroll. They are comic deviations of people, personalities, and their eccentricities according to the approvals or disapprovals they met with a child. However, her deviations are so subtle and complex and reflect adult writer’s finesse that makes those descriptions distanced from the real child’s accounts. It has two distinct levels — one that evokes pleasure that comes from the experience of a fantasy world, meant for the child reader, and a critical layer meant for the adult reader. The
child Alice, while fictionalizing, can neither cross the cultural or political boundaries, nor disown or leave the adult institutions or beliefs. Alice’s fictionalizing is given a dream trope to make her return to the mainstream possible, natural, and unavoidable. The differences between Alice’s and Marji’s fictionalizing are quite evident. Carroll is a male Victorian writer, imagining a Victorian girl-child, keeping the Victorian reader in mind. Children’s fiction is often characterized by this dual stance.

A careful examination of Marji’s fictionalizing would reveal an interesting pattern. Marji fictionalizes God and his role according to her belief that she would get all the answers for her doubts and questions from him. Her obsessive engagements result in her dreaming herself as the next prophet. Her dream is shattered when she realizes his inability to protect her Uncle, Anoosh. She shouts mercilessly at the god and asks him to get lost from her mind, which she has allowed him to occupy. His role of a “giver” of higher values is literally interpreted as a giver of desirable things and people.

Her dreaming is always overshadowed and penetrated by recurring accounts of mass violence, bombings, secret killings, political executions, physical tortures, forced migrations, etc. Constant exposures to violent acts end her child-like dreaming unnaturally and abruptly. She dreams of prophets but not of fairies, imagines the children blown to smithereens, and fictionalizes the severed body of Ahmadi. Even her short trip to Europe (77), preceded and succeeded by lethal attack, violence and invasion, is too small to divert her to enjoy the joy of Italy and Spain. Just the three words, “… it was wonderful” at the end of the panel describe her inability to be charmed by the exotic joy of Italy and Spain.

Her fictionalizing is influenced by her reading. A panel on page twelve virtually shows the taller columns of books piled surrounding her (Satrapi 12). They are taller than her
perceptions. They are about Fidel Castro, children of Palestine, young Vietnamese, and about the revolutionaries in her country. She mentions her favorite comic book on “Dialectical Materialism”. She caricatures the dialogue between Marx and Descartes and ends up with Marx hitting Descartes with a stone, and the speechless staring of Marx and God (Satrapi 13). She sees herself as a future Che Guevara or Fidel Castro. The revolutionary discourse at her home and in the books she reads penetrates her fictionalizing unconsciously, unknowingly. Her fictional belief that the king is chosen by God is complicated by her father’s detailed account of the historical reality of the king. Her unwillingness results in framing those accounts in strictly serious panels rounded by her hope that, “Maybe, God helped them nevertheless.” After Shah’s departure the struggle for the adults is over temporarily, however the stories of struggle linger with the children. They play mock demonstrations, and executions. On Marji’s initiation they play one Ramin’s execution. Her idea is “to put nails between their fingers like American brass knuckles and to attack Ramin,” who in their opinion was responsible for “a million” murders. (45)

In Chute’s view:

Persepolis is about the ethical verbal and visual practice of “not forgetting” and about the political confluence of the everyday and the historical: through its visual and verbal witnessing, it contests dominant images and narratives of history, debunking those that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision. (Chute 94)

Charmed by the revelation that her grandfather was a prince, she proudly dreams him as a prince riding an elephant under the sun (Satrapi 22). Her imaginative fictionalization however is superseded by the fact that it is right time for her to know her maternal lineage. Her fantasizing of the grandpa prince is however bordered by the accounts given by her parents about him, his
education, his political orientations and his political fate. After Shah’s departure almost 3,000 political prisoners are released. Two of them were Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba. When they are released, Marji’s family gets an opportunity to see and know them from very close quarters. They give an account of the systematic torture under Shah’s regime. The detailed account of horrific torture and pain inflicted on human bodies is visualized by Marji in “a panel, large and unbordered—its unboundedness evoking both the uncontainability of trauma…” (Chute 101). She fictionalizes Ahmadi’s body that was flogged, nailed, and burned with hot iron (Satrapi 51). She wonders the torturous use an iron can be put to. The image of systematically cut body of Ahmadi into symmetrical pieces makes the difference between the real brutal horror in seeing a disfigured body and one imagined by a childlike Marji (Chute 101).

Marji’s two meetings with her uncle Anoosh are quite significant in this section. In her first meeting she is concerned about the childhood worry to boast against Laly’s stories about her father Siamak and the accounts of his torture. She wants a better story against Laly’s. All the stories told by Anoosh are eagerly consumed by her so that she could tell them to her friends. When Anoosh says, “They put me in prison for nine years,” she exclaims, “Nine years!” but says to herself, “Better than Laly’s father.” Anoosh wants her to retain the family memory, “I tell you all this because it’s important that you know. Our family memory must not be lost. Even if it’s not easy for you, even if you don’t understand it all.” (60) She exclaims again, “What, the story is finished?” She does not understand the family memory with all its implications. However, he succeeds in making her remember and narrate everything in the form of stories to her friends. Later on, the same stories later on would be converted by her into family history, memory, and legacy. As they are narrated by a child, they are boastful, “There are lots of heroes in my family. My grandpa was in prison, my uncle Anoosh too: for nine years! He was even in the U.S.S.R.
My great uncle Fereydoon proclaimed a democratic state and he was…” Her friend too realizes that it is “too much” (64). The role of “not forgetting” is widened. Both the content and the process are deeply embedded in her. As Chute explains, “Persepolis not only does not forget, but also, more significant, shows us the process of “never forgetting” through the layers of verbal and visual narration: it presents the procedure, in addition to the object, of memory.”(Chute 97)

Marji’s fictionalization is affected by the stories of terror, violence, and brutalities she has heard. Her visualizations about such incidents are evident. Marji visualizes her mother’s narration about her father going for taking photographs of the demonstration. She frames him outside the panels of pictures of demonstrations and cruel suppression of it. Although he stands outside the panels he is feared to be arrested or killed during such protests. She visualizes him as being killed but portrays him flowing to heaven with the God (Satrapi 30). Her fictionalization of the successive horrifying massacres in the section “The Party” takes the form of an abacus. She is in fact trying to count the countless victims and systematically perceive the chaotic genocide (40). The unseen horror portrayed in an orderly image is contrasted by the chaotic, exuberant and full-page image of jubilant celebrations after Shah’s exit as she has been part of those moments. The differently designed dresses, unveiled women, uncontrolled laughter, and victory signs—all percolate in her visuals as exactly they appear.

Shahab’s account of young children being recruited for war just ends with the tossing up of their bodies in an explosion. They are shown with keys hung around their neck. It explains what Shahab narrates,

They come from the poor areas, you can tell… first they convince them that the afterlife is even better than Disneyland, then they put them in a trance with all their songs… It’s nuts! They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle. Absolute carnage. (101)
The keys would be guns in reality, which were handed to them by the military authorities. In contrast to the nameless faceless children who have been turned into weaponized bodies, tossed up in the explosions, is the joyful faces of children tossed up enjoying the party. The two panels as well as their descriptors are in sharp contrast. One is — “The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks,” and the other starts with, “meanwhile, I got to go to my first party. Not only did my mom let me go, she also knitted me a sweater full of holes and made me a necklace with chains and nails. Punk rock was in.” “Sweater full of holes,” and “necklace with chains” link the two scenes in two different ways (102). Chute comments in her essay that, “Persepolis is about imagining and witnessing violence; more than half its chapters— which each commence with a black bar framing a white title drawn in block letters and preceded by a single, shifting icon— contain images of dead bodies and serious, mostly fatal, violence.” (Chute 99) However grim and shocking the account of the children soldiers is, she cannot sustain the grim mood for long. She soon forgets it to go for her first party. Adult writer’s natural tilting towards maintaining the supremacy of the grimness and horror in the narrative, however, is bracketed by the inability of a child in maintaining grimness for long.

Satrapi’s life as child Marji, Marji’s fictionalizing to be memorable as a child Marji, and Satrapi as an adult writer redrawing the child Marji according to child Marji’s wish are three different things. As Marji tries to re-draw, re-read, and re-construct everything around her—heard, seen, or witnessed, Satrapi too reconstructs Marji in her narrative by interpreting her. Marji’s fictionalizations are actually interpretations provided by the child Marji, which were absent in the lived experiences. Chute wonders, “what does it mean for an author to literally appear— in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page— at the site of her inscriptive
effacement?” (93) However these interpretations are by no means intended for ordering or stereotyping the child in an adult fashion. By redrawing Marji she is interpreting the lived and the experiential with the intention to preserve. Adult writer’s authorial temptation to assume the role of fictionalization on behalf of a child is carefully resisted by the writer here. In many senses Marji does not “belong” to the authorially conceived image of a child. Even in her fictionalization she is an interpretative imitator, a true mimetic artist, and not just an unidentified reproducer.

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Reminiscence vis-à-vis Reticence: Interpretive Conflict in the Oral Narratives of 1947 Partition Refugees in Kolkata

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay

Abstract: In the second half of the twentieth century, the introduction of oral history has had a significant impact on the field of Partition Studies in South Asia. The historiography of the cataclysmic event has been thoroughly revised as citizen historians secured interviews of individuals who had witnessed the division of land, recording the experiences and perspective of groups of people who were otherwise hidden from the domain of history. The process of interviewing eye-witness participants for historical reconstruction of the past has helped to document particular aspects of historical experiences which, more often than not, remain absent from other sources, such as official archives, the collective memory of a neighbourhood, and these have resonated with subjectivities of various lived experiences. In compliance with these observations, this paper intends to investigate the interpretive conflict in oral narratives. An oral narrative takes shape in the spatial configuration shared between the interviewee and the interviewer. Leaning on my ongoing fieldwork experience, I would bring into consideration two interviews that I had collected to see how a certain memory is initially suppressed to divert the narrative in a different direction altogether. I will argue that reticence while reminiscing serves an important purpose to acknowledge the trauma of the event. It is of a piece with the historiographical contradiction that the politics of recollection seems to offer space in which a woman’s narration of the events overpowers/overrules the narration of the man. The paper seeks to explore the argument that an oral narrative empowers an individual inasmuch that s/he can be a source as well as a historian.

Keywords: eye-witness participant, interpretation, Bengal, partition, reminiscence, reticence

The process of decolonization in South Asia was vitiated by the partitioning of the land that resulted in the formation of India, with its newly defined borders, and the birth of Pakistan, with two of its wings, East and West, geographically flanking India. The redistribution of land perilously affected two regions in particular: Punjab and Bengal. In the days leading to the Partition, communities indulged in an orgy of reciprocal communal violence, resulting in large scale migration of people on foot who left their ancestral home under palpable threat to life and limb (Nandy 99). A close look into the history of those years brings to our mind various events that preceded it: growing animosity between the League leaders and the Congressmen, differences in opinion between Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, and innumerable political developments that decisively drew the leaders to accede to the Partition Plan. Intriguingly
enough, parallel to this political development, there runs a history of human displacement, with people crossing the border to safer regions, somehow nestled together in groups and communities indulging in reciprocal violence commonly known as the Partition riots. To quote Urvashi Butalia:

“The Political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or ever since so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly…Estimates of dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a larger Indian estimate) but that somewhat around a million people died is widely accepted” (3).

Though it was decided that Punjab and Bengal would be partitioned together in 1947, the nature of the vivisection in both these regions was markedly different as the Partition of Bengal had undergone a slower, but a prolonged, effect of the division, stretching for almost three decades. In their edited book The Trauma and The Triumph, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta aver:

“While the Partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-1950), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuous process. Displacement and migration from East to West that is, from former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal, is still an inescapable part of our reality…” (2).

Moreover, the statistics as well as the memory of the event continues to disturb the sense and sensibilities of individuals, especially those from Bengal and Punjab, where generations grew up listening to stories of how a line drawn by Radcliffe resulted in displacement from their ancestral home, leading them to cross borders and establish themselves again in a foreign land. Ironically,
however, it is in this foreign land that individuals and their families would be assimilated as naturalized citizens.

In Nationalism Reframed, Rogers Brubaker introduces the concept of the ‘nationalizing state’ to suggest that the nation is a dynamically charged polity which adopts various policies or practices and these, in turn, “make the state a real nation-state, the state of and for a particular nation” (66). The State policies are instated, perpetuated and promulgated in such a manner that the citizens voluntarily adhere to these. Such policies help structure, as Ernest Gellner observes, “the will or consent” of the citizens towards the State and these “constitute an important factor in the formation” of the nation-state (53). In India, “Partition constitutes what Dominick LaCapra describes as the ‘founding trauma’ that is ‘the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective and/or personal identity’” (Leonard 3). Hence various strategies are employed by those in power to consign the memories of the Partition to oblivion. Acts of remembering also bring to light the internalized notions of ‘us’ against the ‘other’ community, and do, in a way, draw our attention to the fact that communal division in India is deeply entrenched in the ‘collective memory’ of individuals. Taking cognizance of the communal division, that instigates communal tension in India, the State intervenes in the scheme of things to strategically appropriate memory. Textbooks of various schools where the Partition is referred to in passing, testify to this conscious appropriation of the political—and the personal—aspects of the tremendous human upheaval (Khan 5). De-legitimisation of the catastrophic event suggests that the Partition appears as a footnote to an event of greater significance, the Independence of South Asia. It is precisely here that oral history narratives based on the Partition count heavily for they present a human shape and voice to the struggles of the individuals.
It is interesting to note that the discourses on the Partition have led to new explorations, especially in the last three decades (Gupta 122). The new inquiries have made interventions in the sense that these have moved away from a *nationalistic account* of the event to focus on the lives of ordinary individuals, of what we can call the *people’s history*, remembered and recollected in ways which the domain of disciplinary history calls ahistorical and outside its purview (Perks x). The historiography of the cataclysmic event has been thoroughly revised as citizen historians secured interviews of individuals who had witnessed the division of land, recording the experiences and perspective of groups of people who were otherwise hidden from the domain of disciplinary history. University of California, Berkeley based the 1947 Partition Archives (founded by Gunneta Singh Bhalla) & Citizens Archive of Pakistan are points to reckon with. The process of interviewing eye-witness participants for historical *reconstruction* of the past has helped to document particular aspects of historical experiences which, more often than not, remain absent from other sources, such as official archives, the collective memory of a neighbourhood, etc., and these have resonated with subjectivities of various lived experiences. In the process, the archiving of these individual stories has opened up new strategies to negotiate with “the selective historicization and fissures in collective memory” of South Asia (Saint, Sengupta, & Jalal 4). The moment of rupture, in both Punjab and Bengal, resulted in an orgy of reciprocal violence but with time, and with the emergence of individual stories from either side of the border, there is an effort to reconcile with the pain and suffering experienced by many during and after the Partition (Zakaria 12).

It is important to note here that though there have been significant developments in discourses on Partition, one often fails to realize that the nature, form, and afterlives of the Partition in Bengal are quite dissimilar to those in Punjab. For instance, writings on Bengal
Partition do not conform to the model of literature that critics are familiar with (Sengupta 188). Writings and recollections of those in Punjab focus on the commonplace pathological violence of the period whereas the stories in Bengal are centered on the “struggles and privations of displaced” individuals (Leonard 5). Interestingly, cross-border migration along the Indo-Bangladesh borderland has not been limited to the Partition years. Jhuma Sen observes that migration from Bangladesh (formerly named, East Pakistan) happened in successive waves with the first batch of displaced individuals relocating in 1947, the second in the years following the Dhaka riots in the 1950s and the third in the second half of 1960s, stretching all the way to 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (103). Moreover, an intriguing feature of border studies in South Asia is that while cartographic boundaries shared between India and Pakistan are considered ‘closed,’ the borders of India and Bangladesh are porous, open to fluid migration that is a living reality for families settled near the barbed wire fence. This strange character of the Indo-Bangladesh borderland leads to the emergence of a transnational network of family, commerce and business that often interrogates the very idea of nationalizing the nation (Ghosh 45). Such multifaceted rendering of the Partition of Bengal complicates the entire domain of collective memory formation so much so that it culminates in the reconfiguration of personal values, familial identities and national allegiance. In compliance with these observations, this paper intends to investigate the interpretive conflict in oral narratives of individuals who migrated during the dramatic decades following the Partition of Bengal in 1947. Kolkata is the site of the fieldwork for the research. Reason being the city absorbed a considerable portion of refugees from East Pakistan along with 24 Parganas and Nadia district in West Bengal (Chatterji 120). The refugees who rehabilitated in Kolkata are often termed as ‘self-settled’ refugees (Chatterji 141). Intriguingly enough that has not always been the case as evident from the experiences I had
in the field. While the government was extremely munificent in its treatment of upper caste Hindu refugees, it adopted different policies when it came to catering to the needs of the Dalits and other marginalized sections (Sen 104). The second interview that I refer to bears testimony to this point. Leaning on my ongoing fieldwork experience, I would, with great moderation of choice, like to bring into consideration only two of the interviews that I have secured to see how a particular memory is initially suppressed to divert the narrative in a totally different direction. I will argue that reticence while reminiscing serves an important purpose to acknowledge the trauma of the event. The paper seeks to explore the argument that an oral narrative empowers an individual inasmuch that s/he can be a source as well as a historian.

In the Introduction to the Oral History Reader, Robert Perks defines oral history as the act of “interviewing eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction” (ix). Since the interview process is exclusively an act of recollection, it is filtered through an individual’s experience of an event at a particular period of time. It is pertinent to note that there exists a considerable time gap between the event and the time of the interview. In the case of the Partition, this time gap extends for over seventy years. It essentially means that the entire interview process primarily functions through the prism of memory. The importance of memory is that it gives an individual a sense of continuity over time. At the same time, one must remember that an oral narrative shapes itself in the spatial configuration shared between the eye-witness participant and the interviewer. Hence, it becomes equally important to contextualize the interviews—who is speaking, what are the personal and political agenda of the individual and, most importantly, what kind of event they are describing. The agency of the oral historian must also be accounted for. The social conditions that inspire one to collect interviews, his/her political worldview and class-caste position, shape in many ways, the narrative presented in front
of the camera or the voice recorder. The interview, to quote Joan Sangster, emerges “as a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewee and the interviewer” (11). What complicates the matter is that as the interview transpires as a historical document in the form of a transcript/text, there is a tendency to disregard the orality of the oral sources, and this, as Alessandro Portelli opines, has a “direct bearing on the interpretive theory” (64). After all, much of how an incident is being narrated gets lost in the transcribed text.

The tone and volume as also the range and rhythm of memory-speech carry implicit meanings and socio-cultural connotations that is extremely problematic to reproduce in writing. Therefore, one can argue that interpretation is contingent on the spatiality shared between the eye-witness participant and the interviewer. At times, it changes with every other question; some may freely talk, but as soon as the recorder is turned on the interviewee assumes a more professional role. Such slippages in narration make oral narratives extremely complicated and an interviewer has to be aware of it whenever s/he is listening to the stories. Let me elucidate these points by referring to my fieldwork interviews.

I interviewed Mr. Maniklal Adhikary in the capacity of a citizen historian, working in collaboration with the 1947 Partition Archive ¹. I was acquainted with Mr. Adhikary in one of those traditional Bengali *adda* sessions held in my sister’s in-law’s house in Kasba, Kolkata, West Bengal. Dr. Bijan Kumar Bhaduri, my sister’s father-in-law, who also happens to be a close friend of Mr. Adhikary, introduced us. The interview was conducted in the Bhaduri house a few weeks later. Born in the village named Brahminkhara in Comilla in present-day Bangladesh, Mr. Maniklal Adhikary was five years old when the Second Partition of Bengal took place. Though he remembers little of the tension raging due to the division of land and ensuing

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¹ Interview with Mr. Maniklal Adhikary, interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, 27th March 2017
independence, he was quite particular to stress that Muslim households in their village did not create any problem, instead they protected their home while riots broke out in neighbouring villages. In the initial phase of the interview, time and again his narration was directed to the Hindu-Muslim relationship in his village. His father, who was a doctor by profession, stayed back in East Pakistan along with his mother. They migrated later in 1960, thirteen years after the Partition. He informed me that he twice went to East Pakistan to meet his parents. I was immediately drawn to ask about his experience of visiting the land which was formerly his home but was now part of a different nation-state.

**Interviewer:** Though the land was divided into two countries, did you ever feel that you were traveling to a different country to meet your parents?

**Mr. Adhikary:** (quick response) No! No! I never felt that way; neither did my parents. See, we were loved there. People liked us. They wanted us to stay.

**Interviewer:** So, it did not make any difference that the land was divided?

**Mr. Adhikary:** No, it did not. Hence, my extended family still lives there. Also, my father being a doctor treated everyone, and he was quite respected. I never felt like I am visiting a different country.

There were various threads in Mr. Adhikary’s retelling that he laced together to form his narrative. His father, being a doctor, who treated everyone irrespective of their caste or religion, underscored his popularity among the Muslims who were mere peasants tilling Hindu lands. Hence, the Muslims offered protection to their family and even wanted his parents to stay after the partitioning of the land. Later, on questioning about his awareness of the politics played out between leaders during 1940-50s, he answered very little, dismissing it with a quick, explicit statement like, “I don’t remember much”, but while reminiscing about his post-partition
experiences he could pinpoint the details of his stay in Sealdah, his experience of endlessly waiting in queue to collect government aid and his schooldays in Hooghly. It did not take long to understand that the narrator’s authority over what he was willing to talk about was channelizing the interview. It depended on the questions I was asking as much as on his replies before the recorder. He deliberated at length about the garment shop that he started on the footpath near Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He used to sell innerwear and T-shirts for men. Gradually he started saving money and secured a shop in Jadavpur railway station. What began as a mere small shop has now matured into a three-tier huge showroom in Jadavpur station road. He, along with his sons, looks after the business. Throughout this phase of the interview, he talked of his family but was silent regarding the part played by his brothers in his life.

**Interviewer:** Did your brothers help you in your business?

**Mr. Adhikary:** Not really. No. (pause)

Interviewer: You mentioned having an elder brother, did he not guide you in any way?

**Mr. Adhikary:** He did.

His short, partial, reticent responses influenced me to question about his brothers.

Interviewer: How close were you to your brothers? Did you share a close bond with them?

**Mr. Adhikary:** I did. However, Borda (elder brother) had his own life to look after.

My younger brother, however, is missing for the last ten years.

Interviewer: Missing? You mean…

**Mr. Adhikary:** Well, he did not keep good company when he was young. I was lucky to have Bijan and my friends.
Interviewer: Did you inform the police? Where is he now?

Mr. Adhikary: I do not know. (Pause) I got hold of him, got him married too. (Pause) He left again. As I said, he did not have good friends. I was lucky to have good friends who helped me, motivated me.

Before I could ask him about his younger brother again, he intentionally changed the topic to talk about my sister’s father-in-law and others who helped him in his business endeavour. As an interviewer, I was aware of the fact that my eye-witness participant did not want to discuss a specific topic with me. Hence, he resorted to reticence, a common conversational ploy to evade a particular topic. The reticence embedded in the conversation above is pretty evident. It is pertinent to observe that reticence operates as an essential strategy that helps to suppress an unpleasant memory, often directing the interview in a different direction. The argument that the interviewer, by virtue of his/her understanding of the context of the conversation, has the agency to shape the narrative needs to be thoroughly revised as we read into, what Lenore Layman defines as, “[the] narrator’s authority” that lies “at the heart of this area of reticence” (212). To argue further, an eye-witness participant, as s/he agrees to be interviewed, has in mind certain subjects and themes s/he considers crucial and worthy of being recorded. Mr. Adhikary discussing the Hindu-Muslim bond in his village is a point to reckon with. On the other hand, memories judged to be indiscreet are carefully avoided by way of short, reticent answers. It follows that by exercising his authority over the shape of the final interview, the eye-witness participant introduces his interpretation that is conditioned by the historical consciousness of the event he has witnessed.

If reticence alters the shape of the interview, as the interviewee controls the narration vis-à-vis the person who is interviewing, an oral history interview also provides space to reconfigure
the gendered dynamics of power through the process of retelling. I embarked on a project to interview couples together to analyze how a man’s telling of the story can be different from the woman’s narration of events. Urvashi Butalia explores the gendered telling of the Partition, arguing that “from women, I learned about the minutiae of their lives, while for the most part men spoke of the relationship between communities, the broad political realities” (16). Generally, the man keeps talking while the woman remains silent, uttering a sentence here or there to either substantiate the man’s argument or to convey her point of view. However, the interview I am about to discuss highlights the fact that an oral history interview opens up a theoretical framework where the woman’s retelling of the past destabilizes the man’s narration of events.

I interviewed Mr. Bhadro Biswas and Mrs. Reena Biswas at Patipukur, Dum Dum, West Bengal. A fishmonger by profession, Mr. Bhadro Biswas was about ten years old when he migrated to India in 1955. While Reena’s family members were traditional fishermen who took to the river to catch fish, Mr. Biswas was primarily a businessman, who did not go to the river but sold fish in the market after buying it from the likes of Reena’s family. Both of them do not remember the year they were born, but it was evident that unlike Mr. Biswas, Reena did not see the Partition of South Asia. So, as the interview began, I directed my questions to Mr. Biswas. Interestingly enough, most of the questions were answered by Reena.

**Interviewer:** Even after coming to India, did you travel back to Bangladesh?

**Mr. Biswas:** Quite often.

**Interviewer:** How did you manage to do it?

**Mr. Biswas:** I walked the entire stretch to cross the border.

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2 Interview of Mr. Bhadro Biswas and Mrs. Reena Biswas, interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay on 28th June 2018
**Interviewer:** It was an international border; how did you manage so easily?

(Reena assumes the narrator’s voice to comment)

**Reena:** Yes, I remember walking over to Bangladesh to attend a family marriage. My maternal aunties, my mother and I crossed the border on foot.

**Interviewer:** Was the army not posted there?

**Reena:** They did not say anything. No one even looked at us crossing. Young men took the children on their shoulders. Women walked in groups. We did not even have passports. My brother came last month in Dum Dum. That’s when I saw a passport for the first time. However, I’ve crossed over to Bangladesh three or four times after migrating to India to attend family functions.

**Interviewer:** These days, things aren’t so simple!

**Reena:** No, not after the terrorist attacks. The government has changed its policy.

However, when we were young, it was not so difficult. (Laughs excitedly)

After migrating, Reena’s family settled in the fisherman colony, right behind the historical Bandel Church in Hooghly, West Bengal. Mr. Biswas and his family, however, stayed in Hashnabad camp. From there they travelled in government-sponsored trucks to Kurut camp in Madhya Pradesh. Despite the distance between Madhya Pradesh and Bangladesh, it was intriguing to know that the Biswas family often crossed the border.

**Interviewer:** Your father decided to move to the camps in Madhya Pradesh. So, why did you go to Bangladesh time and again?

**Mr. Biswas:** My father decided and so we went.

3 The fact that Mr. Biswas, a constitutionally defined Scheduled Castes, had to live in camps instead of getting resettled in the main lands of Bengal testify to the lopsided government policies that pursued discrimination in rehabilitation
Interviewer: There must be a reason for it, don’t you think?

Mr. Biswas: I never asked my father.

(Reena interrupts here to comment)

Reena: Actually, whenever his mother got pregnant, my father-in-law decided to go to Bangladesh. There the mother was taken care of. However, my father-in-law never liked staying there. So, he came back as soon as the baby was born.

(Turning to Mr. Biswas)

Interviewer: What was the reason for your family to migrate in the first place? Did you witness riots? Or, did your family have some other reason?

Mr. Biswas: No, no! We never faced any riots.

(Reena interrupts him again)

Reena: That is not correct. I have heard the stories. His family migrated because the Muslims targeted the remaining Hindu population in Bangladesh. His uncle’s family was attacked.

Such interjections were instrumental in framing the narrative. Reena stayed at home after their marriage. She heard the stories of the Partition and remembered them better than Mr. Biswas. Later, she completely assumed the role of the narrator.

Interviewer: Do you have something that you brought from Bangladesh? Some family items, a letter or anything for that matter?

Mr. Biswas: I did not bring anything. I was a child when I crossed.

Reena: Actually, I have something that his father gave to me. I have it in the file. It is the migration certificate (emphasis mine). His father gave it to me and asked me to keep it, saying, “This document proves we are citizens of this country [India]. Reena,
if anyone says that we do not belong here, show them this”.

Tarangini Sriraman’s *In Pursuit of Proof: A History of Identification Documents in India* deliberates on the ways the presence of refugees in India altered the State enumeration processes for its citizens (91). At the same time, one understands refugees themselves exhibited a certain administrative ingenuity as they figured their existence through the various documents handed to them after crossing the border. Rather than reading these documents as artifacts of the nation-state, it is possible to think of these ID documents as the “byproduct (sic.) of engagement of subaltern subjects with the welfare establishment” (Sriraman xxxi-xxxii). If we take the liberty to call this the political economy of bureaucratic papers, it appears that the state defined citizenship through the documents one possesses. In the Introduction to his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the Indian state extended citizenship to its people in both the pedagogic and performative registers (9). If the refugees failed to enlist themselves in pedagogical methods of enumeration properly, it would hinder their performative aspect of the right to vote as citizens of India. Read against the backdrop of this observation, one can easily perceive the importance of the migration certificate that Reena talks about. It is Reena who preserved this document underscoring the existential need of the family to get enlisted in the State enumeration process.

It is of a piece with the historiographical contradiction that the politics of recollection seems to offer space in which a woman’s narration of the events overpowers/overrules the narration of the man. A narrative inspired by memory is personal, and it tends to make history palpably human, and to an extent, emotional as well. Reena’s involvement with Mr. Biswas’ familial history attests to her personal engagement with the history of displacement that she considers her own. In the process, her insightful and experiential remarks justify the idea that an
eye-witness participant is not just a mere source, but also a historian, of his/her own accord, who generates an alternative version of history whose objective is to produce a narrative markedly different from the high politics and grand narratives of the Partition (Bagchi & Dasgupta 12).  

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4 A part of this paper was presented at the two-day national seminar on “New Directions in New Humanities Research: Theories, Modalities and Praxis” at English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad
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