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Assignation with Nature: Ecological Sensibilities in Tripura's Folk Tales

Dr. Asha Balachandran

Abstract

Northeast India has a rich, diverse culture of tribes who dwell in lush green vegetation. The folk tales in Tripura are a treasure house of various themes on nature and this article attempts an analysis of two popular tribal oral folk traditions of Tripura, emphasizing their ecological concerns. The tales ("Chethuang" and "Kherengbar") are examined through radical green theory and offer solutions to a sustainable life, propagating ecological spiritualism. These indigenous narratives are a testament to their intrinsic association with nature and they also run parallel to feminist concerns of the women. Their analogous sensibility of exploitation and ambivalent conduct of personhood is a matter of concern in contemporary society.

Key Words: Plant theory, Violence, Resistance, Feminism.

Northeast India has a rich, diverse culture of tribes who dwell in lush green vegetation. The folk tales in Tripura are a treasure house of various themes on nature and this article attempts an analysis of two popular tribal oral folk traditions of Tripura, emphasizing their ecological concerns. The tales ("Chethuang" and "Kherengbar") are examined through radical green theory and offer solutions to a sustainable life, propagating ecological spiritualism. These indigenous narratives are a testament to their intrinsic association with nature and they also run parallel to feminist concerns of the women. Their analogous sensibility of exploitation and ambivalent conduct of personhood is a matter of concern in contemporary society.

Ecocriticism, one of the most intriguing approaches, reviews a literary text not from an anthropocentric worldview, but from an ecocentric perspective, accentuating the representation of the natural world. It applies a range of ecocritical concepts of dualities like growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, sustainability and unsustainability. According to the ecocritics, nature is not a social or linguistic construct since it existed before humankind and language. As tribal people live amidst the natural world and they earn their livelihood from various natural and forest resources, they are allied to and concerned for nature in all possible ways: economically, historically, geographically, culturally and socially. In the neo-globalized context of deforestation and dispossession of forest land, the tribal people are affected emotionally. Northeast India has a rich, distinct culture of tribes who dwell in lush

green vegetation. In this context, the present article attempts an analysis of two popular tribal oral folk traditions of Tripura, emphasizing their ecological concerns.

The folk tales of Tripura, like Indian folk tradition, have been handed down by oral tradition from some remote antiquity. They are a storehouse of doctrines on philosophy, religion, astronomy and ethics. Consequently, they are rich with tales of amusement and instruction. They also exhibit the superstitions, prejudices and beliefs of the common people. Despite repetitive recitals, there is a peculiar power to gratify one's curiosity about the nature of life in these stories. They have the potential to be elevated to mainstream literature for their uniqueness in various themes. The characters include both animate and inanimate objects, where nature acts as an agent for the mutuality of relations. It reveals the dominant social, political and cultural attitudes of the tribe. For every occasion, achievement, bereavement and worship, they compose songs and dance to the tune. The "Chethuang" tale is also recited on many occasions.

This folktale is about a beautiful young girl (Maitungti) who lifted her skirt while crossing the stream and consequently revealed her legs, leading her brother (Bablung) to fall in love with her and forcing an alliance against her will. In the dream, an old person said to her, "Your poor girl, find out the seedling of Chethuang tree and plant it. Worship it and you will be free from all the agonies." (4) Since she had no choice, she climbed up the indigenous Chethuang tree and started singing. She whistled a song— "Chethuang, Chethuang lok Chethuang lok, Chethuang, Chethuang tor Chethuang tor..." (Tyagi 5) (Chethuang, Chethuang grow up, Chethuang grow up) and the tree was growing up. She pleaded to climb higher into the sky to move away from her family and they started chopping the tree. She said, "Oh chethuang tree, you grow five times more than they cut in one stroke. You keep on growing more and more. They want to get me married to my brother. You grow more and more" (Tyagi 5). Ultimately, she stepped into the cloud, breaking the top of the tree. Thus, moved by the hapless girl's pleas, nature helps her leave the sinful world. Since then, Chethuang is worshipped everywhere. The story showcases the transition of primitive society, allowing incest to a more civilized one. The tree gives sustenance to the girl and portrays the relation of nature, culture and literature and how it has been sustaining life. It also depicts the girl taking refuge in nature and explains the natural phenomena of this tree being flat-roofed. This tree is venerated and considered sacred by the Tripuri people.

Trees play the ultimate figure of a mother, ‘mother nature’, who is a provider, protector and giver of life. The figure of ‘Mother Nature’ immediately gives nature the task of sustaining and providing for the human race. Nature’s products are deemed free and available and something that is taken for granted by man. Thus, the tree becomes a motif and pattern that promotes interconnectedness, interdependence, holism, synthesis, and a circular form of life and its ecological relevance in their life. Such narratives keep the said tribe at its centre, and everything about the outside world is dealt with from this centre. They also act like the markers that signify the uniqueness of the Tripuri ethnicity that distinguishes them from other people.

Exploitation and ambivalent conduct of personhood are matters of apprehension in contemporary society.

In Indian mythology and folk tales, trees occupy a remarkable place for their relation with knowledge, wisdom and mysteries. In *Rig Veda* there is a prayer for the growth of Trees: “Vanaspati mount up with a hundred branches that we may mount with a thousand, thou whom the sharpened hatchet has brought for great auspiciousness.” (*Rig Veda* 3.8.11)

In folk tales, the flora is ideally perceived in two forms: physical and metaphysical. In physical form, the plants or trees are seen as providers for humans in day-to-day use, while in the metaphysical form they are respected and venerated. A protagonist (mostly a female), as seen in this story, is either aided by or benefited from trees in some way from the persecutions of the human world. This validates the folk belief that death is simply a metamorphosis into an afterlife. Lal writes on Indian philosophy that “Prakriti is the power of creation as well as destruction and that all originates from her, and melts into her” (Lal 17). This story reveals the silent yet definitive power of nature, trees in this case, to give the final refuge to all persecuted.

“Kherengbar” is another folktale among this community which portrays the misfortune of a newly married couple who suffered due to the fragrance and temptation of the flower of Heaven. The story begins with a young man returning home with his wife after a customary apprenticeship at his in-law’s house. At that time the wind blew and a mesmerizing smell of an unknown flower reached the wife and she inquired about it. The husband replied that an apsara was cursed and sent to earth to live and brought with her a seedling of one of her favourite flowers and planted it. The flower blooms only on other trees and has no roots that can grow on its own. The wife says she wants to put such a beautiful flower in her hair and her husband convinces her to get those flowers but warns her against putting it in her hair, for he

may become a hoolock. Dhanonjay said, “it is not possible for you to decorate your hair with this flower. It is a flower of Heaven. It blooms only for God and it is harmful for human beings” (Tyagi 48). But the wife does not listen and puts it in her hair and the husband loses his human form and turns into a hoolock. The wife realises her mistake and throws the flowers on the ground. The husband then, through gestures, tells her to go home and tell everybody what has happened and they would definitely meet in their next life. The wife was shocked and said, “I wanted to lead a happy life with you. God has not favoured me. For whom shall I now return home! I would like to die.” (Tyagi 50). She started banging her head on the tree and died there, becoming a lizard in her next birth. Thus, during March and April (Baisakh) when the Kherengbar blooms, the hoolock remembers its previous life and chatters hoo-hoo-hoo and the lizard too beats its tail on the ground to express the unfulfilled desire of the previous life. The Gods were moved by the story, so they decided to take all the fragrance from the flower so that these incidents may not happen to anyone again. The flower losing its fragrance is a message not to rob nature. In the same way, women, too, should not be exploited, for it leads to the disastrous end of civilization.

Both stories project how the treatment of nature is synonymous with the position of women. The tales present it through the symbol of the tree and the flower. Women act as protectors (trees) and preachers (flowers) of values in the family. Folktales use the motif of creation (which means one creator, man as a product of organic elements, man is born for a purpose, humans respect the laws of nature) frequently in diverse ways and cultures. The ability to mutate into non-human forms is also a recurrent motif in the folk tales. These tales deliver secular implications in modern cultures. G.N. Devy (2002) says:

The tribal imagination . . . is still to a large extent dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time . . . oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants . . . they admit the principle of association between emotion and the narrative motif. (Devy x–xi)

Radical green theory brings forth the notion that the environmental catastrophe lies in the anthropocentrism of modern capitalism. This initiates the formation of green societies where humans observe themselves ‘in relation’ to nature. This article tries to examine the stories (“Chethuang” and “Kherengbar”) through these notions and tries to offer solutions to a sustainable life, propagating ecological spiritualism. These stories project how modern ways and attitudes destabilize and disintegrate familial relationships. Thus, nature and nurture are

equally important and enjoy a symbiotic relation. The *Atharva Veda* perceives nature as an 'earth-spirit' or living entity, giving reverence, reciprocity and responsibility, which influences the ecofeminist ideologies as well. Greta Gaard rightly opines that "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard 1). Human history has recurrently romanticized interpretations of a Utopian world, the pristine world, where people live in harmony and in sync with nature. They try to solemnize happier human experiences and designs of 'orderliness' for human cultures to practice. Resonating the philosophy of deep ecology, ecofeminism accentuates "principles of diversity and of symbiosis," which is vital as "diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms" (Naess 2)

Along with respecting nature, these folk tales focus on values like cooperation, mutuality, and fostering. The tales also emulate woman–nature proximity and locate and uphold women's voices in the domain of 'nature-culture' as well as "counter and complement the attitudes of the male-centered tales" (Ramanujan xxxi). This culminates in the ecofeminist perception of (logically) challenging binaries like humans/animals, culture/nature, man/woman, self/other, etc., while decreeing that human identity is neither fixed nor predefined; rather, it is sculpted by the seamless associations or differences of the human-nature interface.

These folk tales have been voicing the culture, ethnic identity and mythical world of Tripuri tribes in every possible way. They are carriers of values and traditions that not only preserve but also propagate ecological spiritualism. They convey basic principles and morals for a better understanding of humankind. The tales publicize the notion of nature as a mother and ecofeminist studies also aim at identifying and locating patterns of amalgamation of the human and non-human world. These indigenous narratives showcase the association of nature and humans. In an era of ecological catastrophe, folk tales render solutions to a sustainable and peaceful life. They disseminate stories of care and concern for the human and non-human world alike. The indigenous narratives of the Northeast are a testament to its intrinsic association with nature and they also run parallel to feminist concerns of the women.

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Constructing the Ecological Foundations for a Better Future: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Selected Vlogs of Dakshina

Dr. Tresa Peter

Abstract

This paper examines the transformative potential of multimodal discourse in shaping ecological consciousness, with a focus on the *YouTube Vlogs of Dakshina* produced by the Sarang community in Kerala. Utilizing the theoretical framework of Kress and van Leeuwen, the study analyzes how audio-visual storytelling, narrative voice, and embodied practices within these vlogs communicate earth-centred kinship and traditional ecological knowledge. Through detailed analysis of selected videos, the research demonstrates how Sarang's educational philosophy, grounded in indigenous knowledge, interspecies kinship, and experiential learning, is articulated and disseminated through digital media. The findings indicate that multimodal strategies, such as visual framing, auditory cues, and interactive demonstrations, not only convey ecological values but also challenge dominant Western epistemologies by affirming local and embodied forms of knowledge. By integrating traditional practices with contemporary digital platforms, Dakshina's vlogs function as both educational resources and cultural archives, promoting eco-consciousness and community engagement across generational and geographic boundaries. Ultimately, the study highlights the significance of indigenous pedagogies and digital storytelling in fostering sustainable futures and advancing decolonial approaches to education and everyday life.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse, ecological consciousness, indigenous knowledge, digital storytelling, decolonial approaches

Constructing an ecological civilisation that transforms human identity from mere consumers of global resources to participants within a shared ecosphere requires reimagining kinship to include both human and non-human entities. Sarang, the alternative school created by the teacher couple, Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi, and defined as a space where learning meets life, reimagines education through farming, storytelling, book creation, and hands-on experience. This paper examines how, through a multimodal discourse analysis of the *Vlogs of Dakshina*, the YouTube channel of Sarang, the Sarang model of living illustrates the centrality of earth-centred kinship and traditional ecological knowledge in shaping individual and communal ecological consciousness. Specifically, I argue that the multimodal strategies

employed in these vlogs such as audio narration and visual composition effectively communicate and reinforce the ecological values of the Sarang community, thereby providing a compelling model for cultivating an eco-conscious generation.

Sarang, as an educational experiment that celebrates interspecies kinship, has gained attention among Keralites and non-Keralites over the years. A number of visitors from India and abroad visit Sarang to know and experience the Sarang way of life. This alternative mode of living is an attempt to co-evolve with the surroundings through an understanding and awareness of earth-centred kinship. Education at Sarang is an attempt to equip human beings to become part of the place they inhabit as fellow beings of the non-human world with which they form an assemblage through active participation and communication. To investigate how these educational practices and philosophies are communicated and reinforced, this paper first introduces the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis. The study then applies this framework to analyze selected vlogs from the YouTube channel *Dakshina*, systematically examining how Sarang's approach is articulated and disseminated in digital media.

This paper employs the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis as devised by Kress and van Leeuwen to analyze the *Vlogs of Dakshina* as an attempt at decoloniality. Walter D. Mignolo looks at decoloniality as an attempt to “delink” from Western epistemology by moving toward a “pluriversal” world where many different ways of knowing and being can coexist. This kind of delinking acts as a kind of resistance for those whose humanity and intelligence have been historically denied by “Western code” (Mignolo).

According to Kress and van Leeuwen in multimodal communication, meaning is not made just once but is articulated across four “strata” or domains of practice: discourse, design, production, and distribution. These four domains shape communication by organizing how knowledge is constructed, conceptualized, physically realized, and shared (3).

Discourses are socially constructed bodies of knowledge about reality, developed within particular social contexts to serve the interests of social actors. Design refers to the stage situated between content (discourse) and expression (production); it functions as both the conceptual aspect of expression and the expressive aspect of conception. Design utilizes semiotic modes, such as language, image, or music, as abstract resources distinct from their material realization. Production is concerned with the actual, material articulation of a semiotic

event, or the creation of a semiotic artifact. It employs ‘media,’ including the human voice, musical instruments, or computers, to give tangible form to a design. Importantly, production is not merely the execution of a design; rather, it generates additional layers of meaning shaped by the physical qualities of materials and the sensory experience involved in articulation (for example, the “breathiness” of a voice signifying intimacy).

Distribution involves the technical recoding of semiotic products for purposes of recording (preservation) or transmission. While often seen as a non-semiotic facilitation of reach, distribution has its own semiotic potential. It can fundamentally alter the meaning of a work; for example, listening to a recorded symphony at home changes its meaning compared to hearing it in a concert hall due to the loss of “aura” and context (4–8). In the context of the *Dakshina Vlogs*, distribution through digital platforms such as YouTube does more than simply increase accessibility; it enables the vlogs to reach a diverse global audience and resituates traditional ecological knowledge within new cultural and technological environments. The technical integration of production and distribution in the digital age allows the Sarang community’s multimodal messages- voice, image, gesture, and narrative to be experienced collectively and interactively. This not only amplifies the pedagogical intentions of the vlogs but also transforms the reception and resonance of indigenous ecological wisdom, enabling viewers to engage with the content beyond local and temporal boundaries.

Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi were teachers who had quit their jobs as government school teachers because they felt the system did not allow them to work effectively (Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi 38–48). Their efforts to instil a new life in the system met with resistance from the authorities and fellow teachers. By 1992, both Vijayalakshmi and Gopalakrishnan had resigned from their jobs. The alternative way of living and education began at Sarang in 1995 with thirty-seven students, most of whom were school dropouts (268). The architects of this experiment faced financial hurdles and had to delay resuming the project. The lessons they learned during the tough times strengthened them, and the journey resumed in 2013. The YouTube channel *Dakshina* was started in 2012 and has more than 1.5 million subscribers. In the narratives they present through the YouTube channel, the teacher couple assumes the role of grandparents, which helps them establish a connection with the audience. Muthassanum Muthassiyum (grandfather and grandmother), in the kinship pattern of Kerala, embody authority as well as love. They are the first teachers and storytellers for the grandchildren, who learn the basics of social and community life from them. Most of the

videos employ the narrative voice of Muthassi, Vijayalakshmi teacher, which is guiding, chiding, and teaching. Muthassi, through her narratives that range from cookery videos to videos on medicinal plants and bees, addresses and establishes a connection with a community of viewers across different age groups.

Dakshina, the YouTube channel, acts as a mouthpiece of their philosophy of life and education, highlighting the non-conventional manner in which they teach their children and grandchildren. Hiranya, Parthan, Chinmayi—abbreviated as HiPaChi—and Jagath are their grandchildren and are usually featured in their videos. The narrative voices of Muthassi and Muthassan are addressed to them as well as to viewers worldwide.

Methodology

This study examines five videos published on the *Dakshina YouTube* channel between 2020 and 2023. The videos were selected purposively because they represent recurring aspects of Sarang’s ecological philosophy, including traditional knowledge, food practices, medicinal knowledge, and rituals. The selected videos focus on the step-by-step preparation of Kanmashi (eyeliner) in “കൺമഷി ഉണ്ടാക്കുന്ന വിധം” (00:00:00–00:03:10), the extraction and culinary use of bamboo shoot in “മുളങ്കുന്ദ് കറി തയ്യാറാക്കുന്ന വിധം” (00:01:04–00:07:30), the *Preparation of Inchikkari* in “വരൂച്ചിയുടെ രുചി വരവ്! | ഇഞ്ചിക്കറി അന്നതാരി” and the observance of Urumboottal (Feeding the Ants) during Onam. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, using multimodal discourse analysis to examine verbal narration, visual composition, framing, colour, gesture, gaze, sound, music, and on-screen text. Particular attention is given to Kress and van Leeuwen’s four strata—discourse, design, production, and distribution—and to the ways in which these modes work together to communicate ecological values and traditional knowledge. Video timestamps are used to identify and discuss specific scenes. Through these carefully orchestrated and synchronised modalities—voice, gesture, gaze, and framing—the YouTube videos transform abstract ecological facts into tangible lived experiences for viewers. The vlogs serve as a repository of traditional ecological knowledge and a celebration of earth-centred kinship through a poetic interweaving of visual framing, spatial layout, and auditory modality.

The *Vlogs of Dakshina* celebrate Attappadi, with the Sarang Hills serving as both the object and subject of the series. These narratives represent the microcosm of the Western Ghats and utilize visual modalities—including camera angles, framing, and colour palette—to

foster immediate intimacy between viewers and the place. Specifically, the vlogs' multimodal strategies, such as carefully composed visuals, ambient sound, and diegetic music, facilitate topophilia by allowing viewers to experience the local flora and fauna, thus cultivating a longing to connect with the ecology. In the vlog depicting the natural preparation of Kanmashi, for example, the combination of a young girl's singing while she applies eyeliner, the transition from her lively speech to expansive landscape shots, Muthassi's guiding narration, and an old Malayalam song exemplifies how auditory and visual resources operate together to construct meaning ("കൺമഷി ഉണ്ടാക്കുന്ന വിധം" 00:00:00). The multimodal layering is further evident when three children walk along a worn path as the title *Dakshina Productions* appears (00:00:26), a shot that not only situates the viewer spatially but also foregrounds movement through place. The visual focus on thick black Kanmashi on a plantain leaf further utilizes close-up framing to reorient viewers' perception—from eyeliner as a synthetic commodity to Kanmashi as an indigenous, homemade product. Here, Muthassi's narration functions as both verbal and pedagogical modality, describing Kanmashi as a medicine and thus challenging the Western framing of eyeliner as merely cosmetic. The process modality is reinforced by showing each of the ten medicinal plants being introduced one by one, always through the embodied gesture of a child's hand picking the leaves. The appearance of both the Malayalam and botanical names as on-screen text exemplifies multimodal cohesion and prompts viewers to engage actively with the knowledge presented. These combined audiovisual elements, narration, on-screen text, gesture, and visual detail of children collecting plants evoke and reinforce a deep ecological connection. Muthassi's explanation of the preparation process, from extracting juice with cotton cloth to its combustion and mixing with ghee and mineral elements, is conveyed through both visual demonstration and stepwise narration, exemplifying how multimodal discourse makes traditional ecological practices accessible and meaningful to a contemporary audience.

The narrative then shifts to the childhood of Muthassi. Like a storyteller, oral historian, and custodian of traditional knowledge, she talks about her childhood days when she and her siblings accompanied their mother to collect medicinal plants. Her mother never spoke as they went to gather these plants. As the narrative goes on, the visual of Muthassi is juxtaposed with the visual of the three children shown at the outset, linking their act of gathering medicinal plants to Muthassi's childhood experience. Muthassi's mother, as she prepared the Kanmashi, would explain the benefits of each medicinal plant. Each plant had different effects: while one

gave freshness to the eyes, another strengthened the nerves. Muthassi's mother learned all this from her father, who was a renowned Vaidyan, a practitioner of an indigenous system of medicine. Muthassi asserts that her attempt is to preserve and transfer this knowledge to posterity. She also critiques the Western-inspired modern education system, as it never incorporated this valuable knowledge in textbooks. Instead, it taught children to see these plants as weeds that needed to be removed.

The discourse, as theorized by Kress and van Leeuwen, constitutes the “what” of multimodal communication (4). In the vlog discussed above, the discourse encompasses more than just the process of making Kanmashi; it also involves the transfer of traditional ecological knowledge, celebrated as embodied heritage through the presence and performance of the actors, narrative voice, background music, and visuals. To effectively deliver this discourse, Dakshina employs storytelling, a traditional indigenous form of knowledge transmission. Vijayalakshmi, the teacher, through her narrative voice as grandmother, together with the children collecting plants, enacts a practice that was once common but now appears unfamiliar or even exotic to twenty-first-century viewers accustomed only to the commercial cosmetic version of eyeliner.

The visual layout further reinforces the storytelling environment. Muthassi appears in a traditional Kerala saree or set mundu, seated in a room with brown, mud-textured walls. A thookkuvilakku, a traditional hanging brass lamp, is positioned on the right side of the frame, its flame casting a warm glow to dispel nearby darkness. Muthassi's face is lit from the front left, while the corners remain nearly dark, drawing attention to both Muthassi and the Thookkuvilakku. This golden-brown, monochromatic lighting produces an intimate and sacred ambiance. Vijayalakshmi's voice, her expressions, and the symbolic presence of the Thookkuvilakku combine to create an evocative setting for storytelling. As a result, viewers are drawn into the scene, experiencing the sense of being among the children of Sarang, gathered around Muthassi and listening to her stories.

The second vlog used for the analysis is on bamboo shoot. The *Vlog* titled “മുളങ്കുന് കരി തച്ചാറാക്കുന്ന വിധം” is part of a series of vlogs categorized under the title അനതാരി (Anathari), which means the things used to make a dish. Dakshina has also given a subtitle to the Anathari series of vlogs—pachakathinu oru puthiya vakhyanam, or “a new interpretation of cooking” (*Dakshina* 00:00:01–00:09:00). This vlog has a short introductory video of one minute and four seconds in duration, which shows various dishes made of bamboo shoot:

“Guess What! World Bamboo Day Special.” This vlog is accompanied by the voice of a male narrator who speaks in the Irula language about bamboo shoot (Dakshina 00:00:05–00:01:04). The vlog proper on bamboo shoot is narrated by Vijayalakshmi, and she starts with the numerous health benefits of bamboo shoot. She introduces bamboo shoot to the audience and explains its health benefits in the vocabulary of modern science. Bamboo shoot is a source of various nutrients, minerals, and micronutrients. It has been called a nutraceutical or a food substance with extraordinary health benefits, including the prevention and treatment of diseases. Bamboo shoot is also a rich source of the “miracle life element” called selenium. Vijayalakshmi, after pointing out the various properties of bamboo shoot discovered by modern science using modern equipment and methodology, adds that all the same knowledge was shared with them by their Gidda Mooppan of the Irula tribe more than three decades ago. The vlog then plays the audio of the male narrator in the Irula language, who speaks about the health benefits of bamboo shoot (Dakshina 00:01:40–00:01:53).

The introductory segment of the vlog provides a pointed critique of the epistemological dominance and perceived novelty associated with modern scientific knowledge by deliberately undercutting its authority. Rather than presenting scientific breakthroughs as unprecedented, the narrative reframes these findings as affirmations of the indigenous knowledge held by figures such as the Gidda Mooppan. In this context, scientists are depicted as organising and formalising wisdom that indigenous communities have developed and refined through extensive, intergenerational observation and practice. Furthermore, the vlog utilizes this dynamic to interrogate and subvert the marginalization of traditionally feminine spaces, in particular the kitchen, within mainstream epistemologies. By conceptualizing the kitchen as a site of empirical inquiry where the sensory faculties function analogously to laboratory instruments, the narrative not only elevates domestic knowledge-making practices but also challenges deep-seated hierarchies that have historically excluded such spaces from recognized domains of knowledge production. In doing so, the vlog invites a critical reconsideration of how local, embodied, and experiential expertise contests the boundaries established by dominant scientific paradigms.

Vijayalakshmi gives a step-by-step explanation of the preparation of bamboo shoot for cooking. The tough fibrous skin of the shoot has to be removed to reach the edible part. The peel of the shoot is fed to the colocasia by allowing it to decompose underneath it. She shares one of the important principles of earth-centred kinship, gifting, with her audience. When the earth gives us something, we have to give something back to the earth. She acknowledges the

tribal people Gidda Mooppai, Ranginamma, and Vadika, who explained the process of preparation and cooking of bamboo shoot. The shoot has to be thinly sliced. The slices must be soaked in water for twelve hours, after which they can be cooked by boiling in water for fifteen minutes. Salt must be added to it while boiling. A variety of dishes can be prepared using this boiled bamboo shoot, and she shows one recipe made with dal (00:02:01–00:09:00).

The discourse, or the “what” of the communication, is the traditional ecological knowledge regarding bamboo shoot. The ever-present flora in the visuals transports the viewers to the Sarang Hills, inviting them to be in communion with their surroundings. The absence of plastic materials is an important feature of the Sarang way of living. Teak leaves are used to collect bamboo shoots instead of plastic covers or containers. The analogous scheme, the green colour of plants and the brown colour of earth in the form of clay stoves, unites the urban folk steeped in the din and bustle of modern cosmopolitan life with the warmth of nature. The absence of synthetic colours reinforces the idea of forest-foraged origins.

The third vlog examined in this research focuses on Inchikkari. The title, വരരുചിയുടെ രുചി വരവ് | ഇഞ്ചിക്കരി | അനാഠാരി (*Vararuchiude Ruche Varavu / Inchikkari / Anathaari*), introduces both a traditional dish and a tale from Kerala’s folklore. The vlog retells the story of Vararuchi, whose legendary riddle is presented by Muthassan, Gopalakrishnan. Visual and narrative elements intertwine as the story unfolds: Vararuchi’s unusual requirements for accepting a meal—feeding one hundred people, providing 108 side dishes, consuming “three people,” and being carried by four—are cleverly decoded by the Brahmin’s daughter, who recognizes that the 108 dishes are embodied in inchikkari. The visuals accompany Gopalakrishnan’s narration with scenes of ginger harvesting and preparation. Muthassi then appears washing an uruli, a traditional brass vessel with ash and coconut husk fibre. The vlog’s multimodal approach uses storytelling, visuals of ingredients, and stepwise preparation to emphasize that inchikkari’s distinctive value comes from its blend of six rasas and that this knowledge is part of a living cultural heritage. The video integrates traditional ecological practices and folklore with close-up shots, tactile demonstrations, and narrative voice, concisely linking the preparation of a dish to community wisdom and a sustainable way of living. In sum, the Inchikkari vlog employs multimodal strategies—oral narration, visual demonstration, and symbolism—to convey not only a recipe but also the underlying traditional knowledge and earth-centred values, thus highlighting the Sarang philosophy of harmonising with nature (00:00:20–00:08:23).

The last Vlog is titled ഉറുമ്പുട്ടൽ (*Urumbootal*), or “Feeding the Ants,” a ritual that is part of the Onam celebration, the major festival of Kerala. The vlog shows the HiPaChi, along with Muthassi, preparing a sweet for the urumbu, or ants, and all the other animals in the surroundings. The preparation starts during the day and continues until night. Muthassi prepares the dish while Muthassan and the children prepare the kolthiri—a lamp on a stick—using a thin stick, half of which is wrapped in thin cotton cloth smeared with oil to facilitate ignition. The dish is served on small pieces of plantain leaf. At night, Muthassan and Muthassi, along with the HiPaChi, light the lamp and sing a song inviting the ants. The sweet is kept at different places for the ants. The aim of the celebration is explained by Muthassi through the proverbs “Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavantu,” meaning “May every being of this universe be happy,” and “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” which means that the whole Earth is one family (00:00:01–00:04:25).

By showcasing the making of Kanmashi in their vlogs, Dakshina encourages viewers to reconsider their relationship with the environment by directly challenging the alienation brought by colonial modernity. Colonial modernity, as represented in both educational and societal structures, has severed the colonized population’s connection to their ecological surroundings. The vlogs argue that the true significance of indigenous knowledge lies in its foundation on a sustained, respectful relationship with the environment and non-human entities. This interdependence has enabled indigenous communities to gain an insightful understanding of plant properties, including both their beneficial and harmful aspects and methods for neutralizing toxicity. Each vlog explicitly aims to disrupt hierarchical boundaries between humans and the non-human world, challenging the view that Earth and its resources exist solely for human benefit. The deliberate visual prominence of flora and fauna in every frame functions as a design strategy to reinforce this argument. Furthermore, the marked absence of plastic products and the consistent use of organic materials for daily needs serve as a visual critique of contemporary society’s excessive consumption and reliance on industrial goods. This representation exposes how technological lifestyles can render natural surroundings insignificant, leading to ecological alienation. The vlogs contend that such indifference to ecology has its roots in Western colonial legacies, which prioritize profit over planetary well-being. Instead, they adopt a holistic approach that celebrates indigenous ways and a non-hierarchical relationship with the environment, prioritizing support for alternative educational models that immerse children in direct experience with their surroundings. This approach, rather than

technology-driven isolation, is presented as essential to counteracting the detrimental use-and-throw model and restoring ecological balance.

The design, the frames, which are dominated by green and brown, colours of earth and foliage, and inhabited by ants, bees, and human beings; the voices of Muthassan, Muthassi, and Gidda Mooppan, celebrating the oral tradition; the gaze of curious children eager to know the mysteries of plants, animals, and soil; and the background music, which evokes a return to tradition, cumulatively transport the viewers to the Sarang Hills as learners of the alternative way of life.

The frames, particularly the close-up visuals of plants and animals, immerse viewers in a digital environment that fosters a sense of interconnectedness within the planetary web. The integration of proverbs, songs, and riddles further expands this environment by preserving and disseminating indigenous wisdom and heritage in a digital archive accessible to a global audience. Thus, the vlogs function not only as educational tools but also as mediators of cultural transmission, bridging traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary digital practices. In synthesizing diverse multimodal resources, Dakshina's vlogs facilitate ecological consciousness and community engagement, providing a replicable model for fostering earth-centred values and practices in the digital age. Through these means, the Sarang community demonstrates the enduring relevance and adaptability of indigenous pedagogies in shaping sustainable futures.

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Stand-Up as Social Critique: An Analysis of Intersectionality and Anti-Hegemonic Aesthetics in Sai Kiran's "Dark Skin and Getting Married"

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Sai Kiran's stand-up comedy special, "Dark Skin and Getting Married," through the integrated perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality. Drawing upon Derrick Bell's foundational CRT framework, this analysis analyses how Kiran's comedic narrative serves as a potent critique of hegemonic beauty standards and entrenched societal expectations within the Indian marriage market. The study particularly highlights the pervasive nature of colourism and its complex intersection with gender and caste, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of discriminatory practices in India. By applying CRT concepts such as interest convergence, racial realism, counter-storytelling, and the critique of legal formalism, this paper unpacks the multifaceted interplay of 'race' (as understood through colourism), gender, and caste in perpetuating and challenging discriminatory practices. Furthermore, it explores the relevance of intersectionality and stereotype threat in comprehending Kiran's lived experiences, thereby enriching the analysis of his incisive social commentary. This research contributes to broader academic discourses on social justice, equality, and the transformative power of humour in deconstructing dominant narratives and amplifying marginalised voices within the specific Indian context.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, stereotype threat, colourism, caste, Indian stand-up comedy, social commentary, feminist media studies.

Introduction

In the vibrant landscape of contemporary Indian stand-up comedy, an emerging wave of artists is strategically employing humour as a powerful instrument for social commentary, actively challenging deeply ingrained societal norms and persistent prejudices. Among these trailblazers is Sai Kiran, whose 2018 special, "Dark Skin and Getting Married," offers a poignant yet humorous exploration of colourism, a pervasive issue profoundly impacting Indian society. While undeniably entertaining, Sai Kiran's comedic narrative functions as a critical commentary on hegemonic beauty standards, particularly the ingrained preference for fair skin, and its profound implications for individuals navigating the complex Indian marriage market.

This article analyses Kiran's stand-up special through the integrated perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality. It draws upon Derrick Bell's seminal theoretical framework to illuminate the complex interplay of 'race' (understood primarily as colourism), gender, and societal expectations in India. By applying CRT concepts such as interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and the critique of legal formalism, this analysis aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which discriminatory practices are perpetuated and, crucially, challenged within the Indian context. Furthermore, this study explicitly explores the relevance of intersectionality and the concept of stereotype threat in understanding Kiran's experiences. This integrated approach enriches the analysis of his social commentary and contributes to a broader discourse on social justice, equality, and the strategic deployment of humour in amplifying marginalised voices.

Crucially, this paper incorporates a critical caste perspective to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of colourism within the Indian social fabric. While Kiran's comedy primarily addresses colourism, the historical and contemporary realities of caste in India are deeply intertwined with notions of purity, pollution, and hierarchical social structures, which often correlate with skin tone and marriage prospects. This analysis will demonstrate how colourism, gender, and caste intersect to create unique forms of disadvantage and discrimination within the Indian marriage market, highlighting how media in this case, stand-up comedy can both reflect and challenge these deeply entrenched power dynamics.

Interest Convergence

In "Dark Skin and Getting Married," Sai Kiran humorously recounts his experiences within the Indian marriage market, where his darker complexion is consistently perceived as a significant disadvantage. He keenly observes and satirises the pervasive societal preference for fair-skinned brides, a preference often inextricably linked to notions of social status and desirability. Kiran narrates a particularly telling anecdote: "My relatives were like, 'We need to find you a fair-skinned girl because you're already dark enough'" (Sai Kiran 04:27-04:31). This pronounced preference for fairness is not merely an individual predilection but is deeply embedded within and reinforced by enduring societal structures.

This phenomenon strongly aligns with Derrick Bell's theory of interest convergence, which posits that genuine racial progress often materializes only when it converges with the interests of the dominant group. In the Indian context, the societal preference for fair skin

actively reinforces existing power structures, including those tied to caste hierarchies, and thereby perpetuates discrimination against individuals with darker complexions. Bell argues that advancements in racial justice are frequently motivated by factors that primarily serve the interests of the dominant group, rather than a genuine, altruistic concern for equality. The ingrained preference for fair skin in the marriage market can be seen as a direct manifestation of this interest convergence, as it serves to uphold existing social hierarchies and solidify the power of those with lighter skin tones, often historically and socio-economically linked to dominant caste groups. For instance, the historical association of lighter skin with upper castes and purity contributes to the maintenance of these power structures, where fairer skin is seen as a social and economic asset.

Racial Realism

Sai Kiran's incisive comedic observations regarding colourism in Indian society underscore the deeply ingrained nature of racial bias. His personal anecdotes vividly reveal how colourism permeates almost every facet of everyday life, from intimate familial interactions to broader societal expectations. He shares instances where his relatives would openly compare him to his fairer cousins, starkly emphasizing the immense societal pressure to conform to a specific, narrow standard of beauty. These experiences resonate profoundly with Derrick Bell's notion of racial realism, which posits that racism and by extension, colourism in this context is a permanent and fundamental feature of society, deeply embedded within cultural norms and practices.

Kiran's experiences compellingly underscore the systemic nature of colourism, effectively challenging any simplistic notion that it is merely an individual preference or an isolated occurrence. His comedic narrative masterfully exposes the pervasive nature of colourism, demonstrating how it is intricately woven into everyday conversations, familial expectations, and overarching societal norms. The enduring presence of colourism, despite legal frameworks designed to prevent discrimination, speaks to its deeply entrenched reality as a form of social stratification.

Counter-Storytelling

Sai Kiran's stand-up routine functions as a powerful form of counter-storytelling, actively challenging dominant, often oppressive, narratives about beauty and desirability within the Indian community. By courageously sharing his personal experiences with a blend of humour

and vulnerability, he effectively disrupts the stereotypical portrayal of Indian men and amplifies the voices of those who are marginalised due to their skin colour. Kiran recounts humorous yet poignant instances where he was subjected to explicit colourist remarks, compelling the audience to critically reconsider their own biases and assumptions. This strategic use of narrative aligns directly with Derrick Bell's emphasis on the crucial importance of counter-narratives in challenging dominant discourses and providing a voice to marginalised experiences. Sai Kiran's counter-storytelling not only boldly challenges the prevailing dominant narrative but also provides a vital platform for countless others who have experienced similar discrimination to feel genuinely seen and heard. This act of public storytelling in a comedic format also serves as a critical intervention, showcasing how personal narratives in media can actively challenge and subvert patriarchal and colourist beauty standards.

Critique of Legal Formalism

While Sai Kiran's routine does not explicitly address legal formalism, his comedic observations about discriminatory practices within the marriage market implicitly offer a profound critique of the limitations inherent in formal equality. Despite existing legal protections against discrimination based on skin colour, colourism persistently thrives in social and cultural contexts, starkly highlighting the significant disparity between abstract legal principles and lived realities. Kiran playfully jokes about how matrimonial advertisements frequently specify the desired skin tone of a prospective bride or groom, despite such practices being overtly discriminatory. This keen observation aligns with Derrick Bell's critique of legal formalism, which posits that the law is often not a neutral entity and can, in fact, frequently perpetuate existing inequalities. Kiran's experiences powerfully underscore the limitations of legal remedies in adequately addressing deeply ingrained societal biases that are reinforced by social and cultural norms. The continued prevalence of colourism in matrimonial practices, despite legal prohibitions, exemplifies how societal attitudes can circumvent formal legal frameworks.

The Permanence of Racism and Caste

Sai Kiran's anecdotes about the deeply entrenched nature of colourism in Indian society strongly suggest the persistence and pervasiveness of discriminatory practices. He recounts instances where even educated and seemingly progressive individuals perpetuate colourist biases, indicating just how deeply rooted these prejudices are within the social fabric. This observation aligns with Derrick Bell's often pessimistic view that racism is a permanent feature

of society, necessitating sustained and multifaceted efforts to address it. Kiran's experiences underscore the formidable challenges in overcoming deeply ingrained biases and highlight the ongoing need for continuous efforts to dismantle systemic discrimination.

Furthermore, it is crucial to explicitly acknowledge the interwoven nature of colourism and caste in India. While Kiran's narrative primarily focuses on skin colour, the historical and contemporary realities of caste discrimination cannot be separated from the discourse on colourism. Traditionally, lighter skin tones have often been associated with higher castes, while darker skin tones have been linked to lower castes, particularly the Dalits and Adivasis. This deep-seated connection means that the preference for fair skin in the marriage market is not merely an aesthetic choice but is often underpinned by a desire to maintain caste purity and social status. Thus, the "permanence of racism" through colourism in India is inextricably linked to the permanence of caste-based discrimination, where skin colour can be a marker of perceived caste identity and social hierarchy. Kiran's humour, while not explicitly naming caste, implicitly touches upon these deeper societal stratifications that perpetuate disadvantage.

Intersectionality

Sai Kiran's experiences within the marriage market powerfully illuminate the intersectionality of 'race' (as colourism), gender, and caste. He humorously articulates the unique challenges encountered by dark-skinned men in finding suitable partners, highlighting how societal expectations and prejudices related to both skin colour and gender intersect to create a distinct and often amplified form of discrimination. For instance, Kiran jokes about how his relatives expressed significantly more concern about his marital prospects compared to those of his fairer-skinned female cousins, thereby underscoring the distinctly gendered dimension of colourism. This observation aligns seamlessly with Kimberlé Crenshaw's pivotal concept of intersectionality, which underscores the imperative to consider the multiple and intersecting identities that individuals embody. Kiran's experiences vividly demonstrate how 'race' (colourism), gender, and implicitly, caste, intersect to profoundly shape his experiences in the marriage market, resulting in a unique form of discrimination that cannot be fully understood by examining any single category in isolation.

This intersectional analysis is crucial. It reveals how media narratives, even comedic ones, can expose the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals at the nexus of multiple marginalised identities. Kiran's portrayal highlights how expectations of masculinity and

desirability are intertwined with skin colour and familial pressures, which are further complicated by the underlying currents of caste hierarchy. A dark-skinned man, particularly one from a historically marginalised caste, might face intensified scrutiny and fewer matrimonial options, reflecting a complex interplay of social prejudices.

Stereotype Threat

Sai Kiran's jokes about his family's persistent concerns regarding his marriage prospects and his own internal anxieties directly reflect the internalization of negative stereotypes closely associated with dark skin. He openly discusses feeling a palpable pressure to compensate for his skin colour by striving to excel in other domains, such as academics and career. This phenomenon aligns with Claude Steele's concept of stereotype threat, which posits that individuals from marginalised groups may experience anxiety or underperform when confronted with negative stereotypes pertaining to their group. Kiran's experiences powerfully demonstrate how stereotype threat can manifest in real-life situations, profoundly affecting individuals' self-perception, behaviour, and life choices. His comedic exploration of this internalised pressure offers a poignant insight into the psychological toll of colourism and the constant need to prove one's worth beyond superficial physical attributes.

Conclusion

Sai Kiran's "Dark Skin and Getting Married" emerges as a potent vehicle for social critique and resistance, masterfully utilising humour to expose and challenge deeply entrenched societal biases. This comprehensive analysis, conducted through the integrated perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality, and drawing significantly upon Derrick Bell's theoretical framework, reveals how Kiran's experiences in the Indian marriage market profoundly reflect broader systemic issues of colourism, gender, and caste-based discrimination.

The deeply ingrained societal preference for fair skin, frequently linked to higher social status and desirability, aligns precisely with Bell's concept of interest convergence, demonstrating how societal biases are perpetually reinforced by structures that inherently benefit from maintaining existing hierarchies. Kiran's insightful comedic observations about colourism in Indian society vividly highlight its pervasive nature, aligning robustly with Bell's notion of racial realism, which posits that such prejudices are profoundly rooted in cultural norms and practices. The comedian's deeply personal anecdotes serve as a powerful form of counter-storytelling, effectively disrupting dominant narratives about beauty and success, thereby amplifying the

often-silenced voices of those marginalised due to their skin colour. This strategic narrative choice aligns perfectly with Bell's emphasis on the critical importance of counter-narratives in challenging hegemonic discourses.

Moreover, this analysis has extensively explored the intersectionality of 'race' (colourism), gender, and implicitly, caste, in shaping Kiran's experiences, illustrating how complex societal expectations and pervasive prejudices intersect to create unique forms of discrimination for dark-skinned men in the marriage market. His humorous anecdotes regarding familial concerns and his own anxieties resonate deeply with the concept of stereotype threat, revealing the often-unconscious internalisation of negative stereotypes associated with dark skin. The persistent nature of colourism in Indian society, despite the existence of legal protections, unequivocally underscores Bell's critique of legal formalism, highlighting the inherent limitations of formal equality in effectively addressing deeply rooted social biases. Kiran's experiences demonstrably prove that while laws may exist to prevent discrimination, deeply ingrained societal attitudes and enduring cultural practices continue to perpetuate inequality.

This research not only powerfully demonstrates the efficacy of stand-up comedy as a dynamic platform for incisive social critique but also underscores the critical importance of integrating intersectionality and stereotype threat with CRT to fully comprehend the complex dynamics of 'race' (colourism), gender, caste, societal expectations, and internalised biases in shaping individual experiences within discriminatory systems. This nuanced and interdisciplinary analysis significantly contributes to a broader academic discourse on social justice and equality, offering invaluable insights for future research and targeted interventions in various cultural contexts where colourism and related discriminatory practices stubbornly persist. By explicitly incorporating a critical caste perspective, this paper offers a more comprehensive understanding of the structural underpinnings of colourism in India, thereby making a substantial contribution to feminist media studies by showcasing how media can be utilised to challenge and deconstruct these complex systems of oppression.

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From History to Culture: Impact of Myth on the Creation of Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of myth in the creation of human identity by considering its internal and external dimensions. The characters in myths, usually gods, goddesses, warriors, and heroes are often associated with the creation and maintenance of elements of nature, as well as with physical, emotional, and practical aspects of human existence. Identity is understood as a marker of how individuals perceive themselves, how they are viewed by others, and how they construct a sense of self through the sociological and cultural conditions of life. The paper first discusses the general characteristics of myth and then examines its relationship with the formation of identity. It further considers how collective and individual myths may affect the psyche by influencing, introducing, or modifying ego ideals through religious and cultural fantasies. The study also explores the ways in which myths encourage identification and sublimation. Ultimately, the paper argues that mythical stories preserved through history and incorporated into culture can contribute, often unconsciously, to the formation of individual and collective identities.

Keywords: Identity, Myth, Culture, Psyche, Imagination

As a culture, humans tend to define themselves and one another through identity. Although individuals hold different ideologies, they also inherit certain traits and assumptions from the past. History is connected with culture, and culture is, in many ways, connected with myths. These myths have played a central role in shaping identity. The emergence of myth reflects human faith and the ways in which people interpret their existence.

Humans interpret their world and their place in it through myth. History reveals that mythical stories, which may appear to have existed forever, were also constructed for various political and social purposes and have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this process. Myths communicate concrete and abstract ideas in relatively simple forms and retell accounts of the distant past in a lucid manner. They speak about creation and often function as symbols of human behaviour. Knowledge of a myth is presented as knowledge of origins and may therefore be used to explain, control, or apply particular practices. Such knowledge can be transmitted through ritual, either by retelling the myth or by ritually justifying it.

The self is formed through interactions with others and within social, cultural, and political contexts. Self-formation begins with the recognition of one's own image and develops through stories about the past and present and through interpretations of events and responsibilities. Individuals contribute to these narratives about themselves and are influenced by the lessons they convey. This connection helps explain the relationship between myth, religion, and ritual. Religious ceremonies recreate mythical time and thereby renew it. Myths are closely associated with religious life because they can provide refuge from present concerns by invoking a sacred past. Myth is therefore part of a cultural context that may have a direct or indirect relationship with religion. Not all myths are religious; some are constructed within communities, yet they can exert considerable influence on individual and collective consciousness.

The mind is central to the construction of identity. Identity can be understood as a mental phenomenon shaped by cultural influence, upbringing, beliefs, and activities. Individuals internalise images and ideas received through culture and may imitate the narratives and values associated with them, believing that these ideas provide guidance for living a good life.

The study focuses on how history and culture shape identity through the prominent factor of myth. It examines how myths influence moral values and how the same myths can also mislead individuals while transmitting culturally and religiously sanctioned ideas.

Myths are traditional stories about gods, goddesses, and heroes. They often explain the creation of the world and its possible end. Some myths transmit moral values from one generation or culture to another, while others involve prophecy and concepts such as sin. Religious and nonreligious myths may contain supernatural or nonsupernatural elements and are often presented as events associated with the distant past, thereby creating a connection with history. Humans move forward by interpreting and revising the past, yet some stories transferred from one culture or society to another remain embedded within communities. Such stories influence how people understand who they are and how they should live, thereby shaping identity. As these narratives are transmitted across generations, their importance may change. Historical interpretations can be altered through documents and later understandings, and mythical narratives may undergo similar processes of reinterpretation. Nevertheless, some ideologies associated with myths remain deeply rooted in culture and are difficult to displace. In this way, myth can contribute to the formation of social ideology, with individuals encountering such ideas from childhood and adolescence.

Religion plays a role in the creation and preservation of some myths, while others are constructed within society. Ideologies preserved by communities may become common within particular cultural contexts, although their effects vary across religions and societies. Some myths have positive social effects, whereas others may reinforce negative assumptions. Because culturally embedded beliefs can be resistant to change, problematic myths may persist. Certain myths are specific to particular regions and may appear unacceptable to people from other cultural contexts. The colonial period provides an example of how cultural ideas can acquire myth-like status. The notion that the West is superior and that whatever the West accepts is necessarily best for Eastern societies became deeply embedded across generations. Such a belief functioned culturally as a myth, contributing to feelings of inferiority and continuing comparison even after colonial rule ended.

Penelope Lively, in “Oral Histories: A Sense of Identity,” states, “We all need a past—that’s where our sense of identity comes from” (Das). She also connects memory with the past. Such memories are related to the cultural contexts in which myths operate. Identity is often understood through the relationship between body and mind, and the study of mind can therefore contribute to an understanding of identity. Stories contain information and values that can be transmitted from individuals to communities. Because myth is narrated as story, its ideas may become embedded in collective memory. The psyche may consequently be shaped by myths, leading people to accept certain ideas as true and to regard adherence to values embedded in those narratives as an appropriate way of life. Myths, whether ancient or more recently constructed, can therefore influence individual identity, and their narratives may transform individuals at different points in their lives.

Myths often provide explanations for uncertainties in the world that cannot be scientifically verified within the framework of the narratives themselves. One well-known example is the story of Adam and Eve and the associated concept of original sin. Christian doctrine understands original sin as a condition of sin into which human beings are born (“Original Sin”). This concept has been transmitted through religious documents and oral traditions and has had both positive and negative effects. The concept of sin can influence individual identity by shaping how people understand their actions and responsibilities. Similar concepts may also appear in other religious and mythological traditions, where they become embedded in cultural systems and influence individual understandings of life.

Creation myths and narratives about how God or other creators brought the world into existence have also influenced identity. Many creation myths share structural similarities and present recurring concepts. In numerous traditions, creation involves the emergence of heaven and earth. Heaven is often imagined as a sacred or paradisiacal realm associated with a joyful existence beyond ordinary human experience. The contrast between heaven and earth, together with beliefs in an afterlife, can shape the identity of religious individuals by encouraging particular ethical and spiritual orientations.

The ancient Egyptian community believed in the resurrection of the body and in everlasting life (“Egyptian Civilization”). According to this belief, life after death required particular conditions: “The body had to be preserved through mummification and given a properly furnished tomb with everything needed for life in the afterworld” (“Egyptian Civilization”). Thus, beliefs about the afterlife influenced individuals who lived within that cultural context. When the Romans ruled Egypt, however, these beliefs gradually changed. Although contemporary Egyptians retain knowledge of these cultural roots, the author argues that such beliefs no longer have the same influence on present-day identity.

Myths are often associated with narratives originating before modern technological and scientific developments, and their historical claims may not always be verifiable. Their continuing existence therefore also depends on imagination. Individuals may interpret or reconstruct stories according to their perspectives, giving them meanings that operate within the mind. Imagination creates worlds, visions, and ideas beyond what is immediately visible. According to Merriam-Webster, imagination is “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (“Imagination”).

Imagination does not necessarily portray a real image; it can also produce representations of things that are unreal or not directly experienced. It is connected with creativity and knowledge and contributes to the formation of ideas. Listening to a story is an imaginative process that helps structure thoughts and ideas. It stimulates the mind and the quest for knowledge. As humans question the ideas that arise in their minds, these questions can stimulate cultural awareness, which may contribute to the formation of identity. The story of Adam and Eve, for example, is transmitted through written and oral narratives and is mentally represented by readers and listeners. The characters and events are given form through imagination, and concepts such as sin can consequently be connected with the real world and transformed into ideologies that are reflected in identity.

Creation stories can therefore function as imaginative accounts through which people understand the universe and its origins. Individuals may imagine the universe as having been created by a creator and may consequently develop a sense of fear or reverence toward that creator. This demonstrates the power of imagination. Whether the imagined figure is understood as real or unreal, people may experience its presence through the imaginative process. Imagination enables humans to think about the past, present, and future and to conceive of concepts beyond what is immediately known.

The fear of God can be understood, within this argument, as a result of imagination. A concept can emerge from uncertainty and subsequently restructure an individual's understanding of reality. Self-discovery is therefore one reason for the persistence of mythical narratives. Imagination can also produce cultural binaries that encourage self-examination and access to feelings, thoughts, emotions, and understandings below conscious levels. Gender roles, too, can be shaped through imaginative and cultural processes.

Gender roles are created through historical and mythological ideas. When Simone de Beauvoir writes, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (283), she raises the question of the construction of gender identity and argues that femininity is a product of civilisation rather than an expression of essential differences between men and women. A woman is gradually shaped by her social situation and upbringing. The *Second Sex* can thus be considered in relation to the cultural narratives through which gender is understood. Historical and mythical stories can reinforce the value of a two-gender system and may also contribute to the subordination of women. Such ideas can become embedded in cultural systems and reinforce patriarchal structures. Society may compel individuals to conform to gender roles because those roles are reproduced within cultural narratives. The story of Adam and Eve, for instance, has been interpreted as portraying Eve as subordinate to Adam because she was created after and from him (Milne). Within this interpretation, Eve is also associated with Adam's disobedience. Mary is subsequently presented in Christian tradition as an ideal woman, and patriarchal interpretations of biblical narratives have influenced representations of femininity. Through repeated narratives, history and culture can unconsciously impose ideas that contribute to a collective ideology and are reflected in identity.

The ancient Egyptians' belief in an afterlife can likewise be examined through the stories transmitted by their ancestors. Such narratives influenced customs and beliefs. In "The Great Hymn to the Aten," composed during the reign of Akhenaten, the pharaoh's wife Nefertiti is

described as “living and youthful for ever and ever.” Literary works from ancient Egypt therefore provide evidence of the cultural importance of beliefs about life, death, and continuity.

Ideas transmitted through history evolve within memory. Memory contributes to the development of the mind, while internalised ideas can influence behaviour and ideology. These ideologies may then be reflected in identity. The heaven-and-earth concept and beliefs in an afterlife recur across cultures, although their forms differ. Reflections of identity, including gender, disability, and cultural identities, can also be connected to inherited forms of communication and cultural memory. Shared imagination can create a continuing symbolic universe. For example, people may fear ghosts even when they do not consciously accept their existence. Such fear may arise from pre-existing beliefs stored in the subconscious. Historically transmitted myths and stories can therefore shape consciousness and, consequently, identity.

The relationship between identity and myth can be understood primarily through history and culture. Myth can be considered a widespread cultural phenomenon whose content varies according to the perspectives of particular communities and the influences that have shaped them over time. People often seek identity by looking to the past, and the past provides narratives through which they understand their origins. Religious, nonreligious, and culturally specific myths can therefore become part of inherited identity. Individuals may preserve ideas transmitted by their ancestors, and these ideas can become integrated into everyday life. Preserved in memory, such narratives become representations of the past through which images of identity are created.

Identity created through imagination, whether gender, cultural, or social identity—is flexible and unstable, although certain concepts may persist. Beliefs concerning the afterlife, including practices such as mummification in ancient Egyptian society, changed through cultural interaction. Some ideas disappeared from particular regions, while others remained rooted in cultural memory. The psyche mediates between memory, ideology, and imagination, and memories may undergo transformation throughout life. History provides an understanding of the past, while myths provide narratives through which mysteries of the past are interpreted. As cultural constructs, myths can acquire a shared reality. Individuals may read a myth as literal divine truth, as nonliteral symbolism, or simply as a literary text; interpretation therefore varies according to perspective.

Science and technology also influence how existing myths are understood. Human reasoning enables individuals to respond to changing ideologies. Myths may continue to function as mysteries even when people attempt to identify the realities behind them. Some cultural myths may eventually be forgotten, while the concepts associated with them remain embedded in collective memory.

Unexplained questions, such as the origin of the universe and the emergence of humanity, have often been addressed through myth. The human quest for explanations can produce concepts and restrictions that influence identity. The desire to discover reality is ongoing. Ideas inherited from ancestors have shaped human understanding, but new discoveries can alter those understandings and produce new concepts by challenging earlier assumptions. Consequently, myths may evolve into new forms. Such evolution can revise existing norms and contribute to the development of new social and individual identities, offering possibilities for change and hope.

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Narrating Displacement: Diaspora and Feminine Voice in *The Palace of Illusions*

Romy Thomas

“Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory, and home which such displacement produces.” (Ashcroft 217-218). The literature of diaspora often emerges from a space of in-betweenness, where memory, identity, and cultural belonging are continuously negotiated. This reflects the complex realities faced by individuals uprooted from their native lands, often grappling with cultural hybridity, alienation, and the reconstruction of selfhood. The diasporic condition is not merely geographical but deeply psychological. In this context, the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupy a significant position, as they frequently explore the complexities of migration, displacement, and the reconstruction of selfhood. India is the nation that finds equality in diversity. The country has more than 20 languages and Hindi and English are the dominant ones. A nation of 28 states and eight Union Territories governed by one central authority, it has many religions and is a secular nation and the people celebrate these festivals together. Thus, it could be considered the best example of a hybrid community. The Indians who migrated to new lands are unable to adjust to a new atmosphere and they write about this as a relief to this condition, forming the group of Indian diasporic writers.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the Indo-American writer, reflects the culture, heritage and the hidden secrets of her country through her works. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, though rooted in the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*, transcends its mythological origins to engage with contemporary diasporic concerns. She termed it “Panchali’s *Mahabharata*” and recreated the epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of a woman who is the central character. By reimagining the epic through the voice of Draupadi (Panchali), Divakaruni not only revisits a canonical narrative but also reframes it through a lens shaped by cultural hybridity and gendered subjectivity.

A diasporic reading of *The Palace of Illusions* reveals how myth can function as a site of cultural negotiation, where the past is neither static nor sacred, but fluid and open to reinterpretation. Divakaruni’s narrative reflects the diasporic impulse to reconnect with origins while simultaneously questioning inherited traditions. The retelling becomes an act of reclaiming voice—particularly a marginalized female voice—within a framework that resonates with the

experiences of displacement and identity formation common to diasporic communities. Draupadi's journey, marked by longing, alienation, and resilience, mirrors the psychological landscapes of exile and belonging.

Furthermore, the novel foregrounds the intersections of gender and diaspora, presenting Draupadi not merely as a mythological figure but as a subject negotiating power, agency, and self-definition within restrictive cultural structures. The diasporic sensibility is evident in the narrative's engagement with memory, its reinterpretation of "home," and its challenge to singular, authoritative versions of history. By blending myth with modern consciousness, Divakaruni constructs a narrative space that is at once rooted and transnational.

This article, therefore, seeks to examine *The Palace of Illusions* through a diasporic lens, analysing how Divakaruni reconfigures myth to articulate themes of displacement, identity, and feminine agency. It argues that the novel exemplifies how diasporic writing can transform traditional narratives into dynamic texts that reflect the evolving realities of cultural belonging in a globalized world. "The truth of art lies in its power to inscribe new dimensions to reality." (Nair 74).

Diaspora, as a concept, encompasses more than mere physical displacement; it involves a profound psychological and cultural dislocation that affects identity, memory, and belonging. William Safran's criteria for diasporic identity provide a useful framework to understand Draupadi's character in *The Palace of Illusions*. Safran outlines six key aspects: dispersal from an original homeland, retention of collective memory, alienation from the host society, idealization of the homeland, commitment to its restoration, and sustained ethno-communal consciousness (Safran 83-84). Draupadi's life, though set in a mythological context, metaphorically embodies these characteristics, making her a diasporic figure in a literary sense.

(...) just as life experiences, imaginative inclinations, and psychic investments lie outside observed geographical boundaries, they are expressed through word and text in a variety of forms. Imaginaries, in social life or fictional narrative, are a central fact of diasporas through time and (...) are explored as taking shape not only in anthropology but across other fields of study as well. (Shukla 552).

Divakaruni worked on something that already exists. The creation of *The Palace of Illusions* was a really difficult task for her. Mythology reflects the culture and identity of a nation and thus, she chose a new subject for her new novel. She had to do a lot of research

based on this and she came back to India for the resources. *The Palace of Illusions* is the retelling of the great epic, the *Mahabharat*. This was unlike her previous novels, as they all deal with contemporary ideas. This novel's plot is set around more than 5000 years ago, and it is not a simple task to work on a subject that already had a storyline. She was familiar with this epic but had to do thorough research and for this she referred to many versions of the *Mahabharat*. The epic is too huge, consisting of over 100000 slokas, 18 Parvas and long prose passages. It is an action-oriented epic and give less importance to the female characters. There are many amazing women in the epic, but is decreased to mere characters. Divakaruni used to hear the stories as a child from her grandfather. Her feelings towards the epic is mentioned in her author's note in the novel *The Palace of Illusions*.

Draupadi's diasporic condition begins at birth, which itself is a form of exile. She is described as the "Girl Who Wasn't Invited," born alongside her brother Dhristadyumna but rejected by her father, King Drupad, who values his son more for his destined role as a warrior. This rejection symbolizes the first displacement—she is alienated from her natal home and denied a clear identity or place within her family. The palace, with its cold, unwelcoming walls and lack of warmth or nature, becomes a metaphor for her alienation and suffocation. This early experience of exclusion and lack of belonging sets the foundation for her lifelong quest for identity and home.

Draupadi's struggle to find her identity is marked by her efforts to assimilate into the roles expected of her, while simultaneously resisting them. She learns the 64 noble arts, mimics the gestures of queens, and tries to fit into the royal mould, yet she remains fundamentally different and restless. Her desire to learn political affairs, traditionally reserved for males like her brother, reflects her yearning for empowerment and self-definition beyond prescribed gender roles. This tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations is a hallmark of diasporic identity, where individuals negotiate between the culture of origin and the demands of the new environment.

Her relationship with Krishna, who accepts her dark complexion and calls her "Krishnaa," is significant. Krishna's acceptance provides Draupadi with a sense of self-worth and belonging that she lacks elsewhere. This bond symbolizes the diasporic need for connection and affirmation in a world that often marginalizes the displaced.

Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers marks another phase of displacement. Initially, she views marriage as a potential solution to her identity crisis—a way to find love, security, and a home. However, the reality is far more complex. Her father's political motives in arranging the swayamvaram, the polyandrous marriage, and her forced sharing of love and loyalty among five husbands challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging.

Her emotional attachment to Karna, a figure of rejection and outsider status, further complicates her identity. Karna's abandonment and low caste status parallel Draupadi's own feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Her love for him, despite societal prohibitions, reflects the diasporic tension between desire and social constraints. The conflict between her loyalty to her husbands and her longing for Karna embodies the fragmented selfhood typical of diasporic subjects. Her thoughts went back to Karna when she fell, "Karna would never have abandoned me thus" (347). She believed Karna would give up heaven for her sake.

The palace that Draupadi dreams of and eventually inhabits—Indraprastha, the Palace of Illusions, is a powerful symbol of her identity and aspirations. It represents a space where she can express her true self, a realm of beauty, power, and magic that contrasts with the harsh realities of her life. The palace's illusory nature reflects the diasporic condition of living between realities, between the remembered homeland and the present place of residence, between the self one desires to be and the self one is forced to become.

However, the loss of the palace following the Pandavas' defeat in the dice game signifies another rupture. Draupadi's exile and humiliation mark a deepening of her displacement and alienation. Her subsequent banishment and life in disguise during the forest exile intensify her feelings of rootlessness and longing for home.

Throughout her exile, Draupadi experiences profound nostalgia for her lost palace and the life she once imagined. This nostalgia is a central theme in diasporic literature, representing the emotional and psychological ties to a homeland that may no longer exist or be accessible. Her feelings of alienation are compounded by the hostility she faces in Hastinapur and the complex dynamics within her family and society.

The Great War, which Draupadi foresees and ultimately witnesses, serves as a metaphor for the destructive consequences of displacement and identity conflict. Her role as both participant and observer highlights the diasporic tension between involvement and detachment.

The war's devastation and the loss of loved ones underscore the costs of fractured identities and contested belonging.

In the novel's conclusion, Draupadi achieves a form of transcendence. She moves beyond conventional identities tied to name, gender, and social roles, embracing a fluid and expansive sense of self. Her reunion with Karna in the form of Krishna symbolizes the reconciliation of fragmented parts of her identity and the attainment of a spiritual home.

This resolution aligns with diaspora theorists' views on the possibility of re-rooting and self-realization despite displacement. Draupadi's journey from exile to self-acceptance encapsulates the diasporic narrative of loss, longing, and eventual transformation.

The diasporic reading of Draupadi enriches our understanding of both the character and the novel. It situates *The Palace of Illusions* within the broader context of diasporic literature, which grapples with themes of hybridity, memory, and identity negotiation. The novel's blending of myth, history, and contemporary concerns reflects the hybrid nature of diasporic identities, which are shaped by multiple cultural influences and historical experiences.

Moreover, Divakaruni's focus on a female protagonist challenges traditional epic narrative dominated by male perspectives, offering a nuanced exploration of gender and diaspora. Draupadi's experiences highlight the intersectionality of displacement, where gender, caste, and cultural expectations intersect to shape identity.

The birth itself is the best example of diaspora, and she faced an identity crisis at her father's palace. She does not feel that place to be home for her and she suffocated and always dreamed of a palace that would reflect her. She was not even satisfied with the name given to her, as it was not appropriate for a person who was appointed to 'change the course of history'. She believed that she could achieve satisfaction from material things, but this proved to be wrong. Her passion for Karna is also a case as she longed for love and recognition. She holds the idea that being home is being in love and affection and it was wrong. She tried to establish an identity through self-interpretation, but this was also a failure. She is the one who faced repeat migration as she was exposed to more than one diasporic space. Her birth is the first displacement from heaven, but she holds no memory of her real place. She was craving to make her own identity. She imagined that marriage would be a solution to find her real home and this is the second displacement she faced. Her concept of love and marriage was altered with she having five husbands and she doesn't feel to be recognized even at this time. She

longed for Karna as she believed that he may provide more comfort and help her find herself. Even after arriving at Hastinapur, she doesn't belong to her real home. Indraprastha was the place which helped her to transform to a real queen from the timid princess. It was the palace of her dream and helped her to shape her identity. But this don't last for too long and she lost her only real place which gave her recognition. She craved for vengeance for all the insult she faced, and she thought that would give her satisfaction. But even this was wrong as she lost her interest of war after Karna's death. She was the one supposed to change the course of history but as a person she was always in the dilemma to find her own identity and a place that would accept her. At last, she was at home with the desire of her heart. She found Karna in the form of Krishna and was at the place where there is no importance for name or relations. She was truly Panchali at that moment, and she found herself only at that stage. Thus, throughout her life she was trying to accommodate and fit into the places she doesn't belong to. She was in the search of herself in material objects, but her home was somewhere else. At last, after a long period of wandering, she was back at the place from she was displaced due to her birth.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a profound diasporic interpretation of Draupadi's character, illustrating the complexities of displacement, identity crisis, and the search for belonging. Draupadi's journey—from rejection and alienation to self-realization and transcendence—embodies the diasporic condition as defined by displacement, homelessness, and eventual return to a metaphorical homeland. Her repeated migrations and emotional struggles reflect the broader experiences of diasporic subjects negotiating hybrid identities in fragmented worlds. Ultimately, Draupadi's story reveals that home is not merely a physical place but a state of being achieved through self-acceptance and reconciliation with one's past and present. *The Palace of Illusions* thus stands as a significant diasporic text, enriching our understanding of identity, memory, and belonging in contemporary literature.

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Hybridity and Generational Belonging: Reading British Bangladeshi identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Navya Chandran

Abstract

Abstract: In contemporary British fiction, migrant communities serve as critical sites for exploring questions of identity, hybridity, and generational belonging. This paper investigates British Bangladeshi identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) through Benjamin Zeitlyn's theory of transnational social fields, which highlights how diasporic subjects simultaneously engage with multiple social and geographical locales to construct hybrid identities. Drawing on ethnographic findings and postcolonial theory—as articulated by Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha—the paper interrogates the ways identities are negotiated across intersecting fields of culture, religion, and education. By contextualizing *White Teeth* within London's multicultural tapestry, the study examines the distinct experiences and identity crises of three families: the Iqbals, navigating traditional values and diasporic tensions; the Bowdens, negotiating race and assimilation; and the Chalfens, embodying liberal scientific rationalism and postcolonial power dynamics. The paper concludes that diasporic identity is a fragmented, dynamic process shaped by continuous negotiation across overlapping cultural and social spheres, making *White Teeth* an alliterary exploration of transnationalism, hybridity, and intergenerational belonging.

Key Words: Transnational social fields, British Bangladeshi identities, Diasporic hybridity, Intergenerational identity, Cultural negotiation

In contemporary British literature, the depiction of migrant communities functions as a critical lens for examining complex issues of identity, hybridity, and generational belonging. Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000) offers a nuanced portrayal of British Bangladeshi characters navigating the intricacies of cultural negotiation and belonging, particularly through the experiences of Irie Jones, Samad Iqbal, and his twin sons, Magid and Millat. These characters incarnate broader dynamics of transnational identity, where cultural practices, affiliations, and senses of belonging traverse and transcend national borders. Drawing on Benjamin Zeitlyn's theory of transnationalism, which underscores the "simultaneity" of engagement with both the country of residence and the country of origin among British Bangladeshis (Zeitlyn 285), this paper contends that *White Teeth* powerfully elucidates the tensions and contradictions within cross-border familial and social ties across generations. By focusing on intergenerational dynamics, Smith's work reveals the fluid and often contested nature of British Bangladeshi

identity as shaped by the ongoing negotiation between heritage, diaspora, and local belonging in a globalized context.

Benjamin Zeitlyn's research on transnationalism and the British Bangladeshi diaspora provides an ethnographically rich analysis of how social ties, identities, and cultural practices are reproduced across borders. Drawing heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social fields and habitus, Zeitlyn conceptualizes transnational social fields as dynamic spaces where social, cultural, and economic networks persist between migrants' countries of origin and settlement, shaping ongoing interactions and power relations (Zeitlyn, *Transnational Childhoods*). His multi-sited ethnographic work, particularly between Islington in London and Sylhet in Bangladesh, reveals how these transnational connections are lived differently across generations. Children, in particular, emerge as active participants who mediate cultural negotiation and identity formation within families and communities, rather than as passive carriers of inherited norms (Zeitlyn, *Growing Up Global*).

Zeitlyn identifies overlapping social fields such as the British-Bangladeshi, Islamic, and educational contexts within which subjects exercise agency and accumulate various forms of capital, including social, cultural, sacred, and security capital (*Transnational Childhoods*). This theoretical framing underscores that identity formation is not a linear process of assimilation but a complex interplay of multiple localities and social positions negotiated simultaneously across global and local spaces. Through this lens, Zeitlyn illustrates how transnational subjects develop hybrid and fluid identities, embodying the tensions between reproduction and transformation that define diasporic life in a globalized world (Zeitlyn, *Transnational Childhoods*).

Homi Bhabha's and Stuart Hall's theories each illuminate the complex negotiation of identity in postcolonial and diasporic spaces, yet their conceptual emphases differ in important ways. Bhabha's notion of hybridity focuses on what he terms the "third space," an ambivalent zone of cultural translation where colonizer and colonized encounter, contest, and redefine identity. Within this space, cultural meanings are never fixed but are continually produced through processes of negotiation, resistance, and mimicry, disrupting binary oppositions between self and other (Bhabha 37). Hybridity, in Bhabha's view, thus becomes a subversive act that exposes the instability of colonial discourse and opens sites for new, hybrid forms of subjectivity to emerge (*The Location of Culture*).

Stuart Hall, by contrast, situates cultural identity as an evolving process of becoming rather than a fixed essence rooted in the past. For Hall, identities are dialogically constructed through difference, shaped by historical, political, and representational forces that continually redefine belonging (Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”). His approach emphasizes the interplay between narrative, memory, and power in the production of diasporic identity, insisting that identity must always be understood as both historical and positional. When read alongside Benjamin Zeitlyn’s ethnographic work on British Bangladeshi transnationalism, both Bhabha’s and Hall’s frameworks deepen the understanding of identity as a fluid, negotiated process.

Zeitlyn situates this negotiation within the emotional, political, and lived experiences of migrants who move between multiple cultural and social worlds (*Transnational Childhoods*). While Bhabha theorizes hybridity as a theoretical and discursive site of resistance and Hall emphasizes historical and discursive formations, Zeitlyn translates these ideas into the realm of social practice, showing how transnational subjects actively construct belonging through familial, affective, and digital interactions that span borders (*Growing Up Glocal*). His transnational approach, therefore, extends postcolonial theory by grounding it in everyday practices of cultural negotiation, memory, and belonging that continually reconstitute diasporic subjectivities.

Building on Zeitlyn’s concept of transnational simultaneity, identity can be rethought as stretching across multiple locations, cultures, and histories rather than being confined to the nation-state. Zeitlyn emphasizes that British Bangladeshi migrants maintain “active and affective ties” to Bangladesh while simultaneously engaging with British institutions, such as schools, workplaces, and religious communities (Zeitlyn 286). This simultaneity challenges simplistic

binaries of assimilation versus separation by illustrating how migrants inhabit overlapping cultural fields where identity is continuously negotiated. Through these transnational social fields, identities are formed in relation to multiple, interconnected sites rather than within a singular, bounded locale. This dynamic framework accords with broader scholarship on transnationalism that highlights migrants’ capacity to navigate and sustain multifaceted

relationships and practices across borders, which in turn shapes their sense of belonging and cultural identity in complex, fluid ways (Gardner et al. 5). By focusing on the lived experiences of migrants within such multi-sited contexts, Zeitlyn’s concept provides an nuanced understanding of diasporic identity as simultaneously local, global, and affective.

Multicultural London forms a vital and dynamic backdrop for British Bangladeshi identities in

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, presenting the city as a vibrant space where multiple cultures, histories, religions, and identities intersect and influence one another. Smith portrays London not as a harmonious cultural mosaic but as a complex urban environment marked by tensions and negotiations between preserving ancestral heritage and adapting to the evolving British society (Alanbaji). Through the intertwined lives of immigrant families from Bangladesh, Jamaica, and England, the novel captures generational conflicts, the challenges surrounding assimilation, and the forging of hybrid identities that resist simplistic categorization. Beyond romanticizing multicultural coexistence, Smith's narrative exposes the contradictions and ongoing struggles faced by individuals seeking belonging in a postcolonial metropolis. This fluid cultural interplay reflects the lived realities of migration and diaspora, underscoring how identities are continuously produced at the crossroads of diverse cultural and social forces. Thus, London emerges as a potent site where diasporic identities are formed and reformed amid the city's historical legacies and social complexities (Alanbaji; *White Teeth*).

The Iqbal family in *White Teeth* comprises Samad Miah Iqbal, his wife Alsana Begum, and their twin sons, Magid and Millat. Samad, a first-generation migrant from Bangladesh, embodies the complex tension between a nostalgic attachment to his homeland and the realities of life in multicultural London. He fervently strives to preserve traditional Bangladeshi values and customs, reflecting a deep emotional and symbolic connection to his place of origin. Rather than simply transplanting his cultural identity, Samad's character illustrates the process of reterritorialization, where cultural identity is continuously remade and re-rooted within a new socio-cultural context. He says, "We are split people. For myself, half of me wishes to sit quietly with legs crossed, letting the things that are beyond my control wash over me. But the other half wants to fight a holy war. Jihad! ... your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth and your solution—it is not my solution" (Smith 326).

Samad Iqbal's character in *White Teeth* illustrates a profound identity crisis as he endeavors to raise his children within the framework of traditional Bangladeshi and Islamic values, while they simultaneously immerse themselves in British culture. This tension encapsulates the larger diasporic experience of negotiating dual cultural expectations. Magid, as a second-generation migrant, adopts Western scientific rationalism—a secular, rational worldview shaped predominantly by his Western education, despite having been sent back to Bangladesh in an effort to instill traditional Bengali and Muslim values. Magid's alignment with scientific thought challenges essentialist notions of ethnic identity and exemplifies how diasporic individuals

actively reinterpret their heritage, navigating hybridity through selective cultural engagement and personal agency.

In *White Teeth*, Millat Iqbal initially embodies the archetype of rebellious youth through behaviors such as womanizing, drug use, and general defiance. His sense of marginalization and uncertainty regarding his place in British society propel him toward a more active and complex engagement with Islam. Millat's involvement with "KEVIN" (Keepers of the Eternal and

Victorious Islamic Nation, a fundamentalist group, offers him a sense of empowerment, belonging, and a voice in a society where he perceives himself as invisible and stereotyped. However, this activism is marked by ambivalence, blending genuine religious commitment with anger and frustration directed both at Western society and his own fractured identity.

The Bowden family, comprising Archibald Jones, a World War II veteran, his wife Clara Bowden, and Clara's mother Hortense, illustrates another facet of cultural identity and assimilation. The family embodies the complexity of multicultural coexistence within a single domestic space. Their marriage is not simply an interracial union but a site of intersecting

histories and belief systems. Clara's negotiation between her Jamaican heritage and her life in London—mediated through language, faith, and family life—illustrates how identity is neither wholly transplanted nor abandoned, but continually negotiated through acts of adaptation and resistance. Clara's identity as a Black Jamaican woman profoundly shapes her experiences, as she initially strives to maintain her heritage through her accent and cultural practices.

Overtime, Clara's efforts shift toward assimilating into Western culture, seeking societal acceptance through symbolic acts such as wearing false teeth and suppressing her Jamaican accent. These acts symbolize her struggle between self-acceptance and the desire for conformity (Gradesaver). Their daughter, Irie Ambrosia Jones, embodies a generational negotiation of identity; influenced strongly by her grandmother Hortense, Irie finds in her a refuge and connection to Jamaican heritage through folk remedies and stories. This connection contrasts with the cultural conflicts and perceived "lies" within her immediate family and English society, positioning Jamaica as a vibrant, albeit complex, homeland. Irie's struggle to reconcile her Jamaican and English lineage represents what Homi Bhabha famously called the "thirdspace" of hybridity, wherein new cultural meanings are generated (Bhabha 56).

The Chalfen family, central to the multicultural fabric of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, epitomizes a

middle-class, white liberal perspective deeply intertwined with postcolonial power dynamics. Marcus Chalfen, a geneticist, and his wife Joyce, a horticulturalist, symbolize scientific progress and intellectual liberalism, wielding considerable influence over the younger generation, including Millat, Magid, and Irie. Their seemingly benevolent guidance reveals subtle forms of cultural control and the complex pressures faced by diasporic youths as they negotiate competing cultural expectations within the postcolonial, multicultural context of London. The family's engagement with scientific rationalism, particularly through Marcus's controversial 'Future Mouse' genetic engineering project, underscores tensions between Western scientific ideologies and diasporic cultural identities, reflecting broader postcolonial critiques of knowledge, power, and assimilation. Smith's portrayal of the Chalfens challenges notions of benign multiculturalism, exposing underlying cultural imperialism and the ambivalence inherent in liberal attempts to manage and assimilate 'the other' (Gregori, Alanbagi; Svanström).

The characters in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* collectively embody the concept of hybridity, actively negotiating multiple identities that arise from their diasporic realities. Samad Iqbal exemplifies the emotional and cultural struggle to preserve traditional Bangladeshi Muslim values, reflecting his desire to maintain cultural continuity in a foreign land. His children,

however, manifest divergent hybrid identities: Magid embraces Western scientific rationalism, symbolizing secular assimilation and a selective reinterpretation of heritage, while Millat adopts religious activism as a form of cultural resistance, embodying the tensions of identity fractured between belonging and defiance. Irie Jones, of mixed Jamaican-British heritage, grapples intensely with issues of racial identity, cultural acceptance, and belonging, thus illustrating the multifaceted complexities of biracial hybridity.

These character dynamics collectively reveal that diasporic identity is neither fixed nor linear but rather an evolving, fragmented, and negotiated sense of self shaped by historical legacies, migration, and socio-political contexts. Across generations, immigrants continuously balance cultural retention, assimilation, and resistance within a globalized yet exclusionary society.

Smith's novel powerfully illustrates hybridity as both a source of empowerment and cultural dissonance, where individuals selectively embrace, reinterpret, or reject aspects of their heritage and host cultures. This selective and dynamic negotiation aligns with postcolonial theories of identity as performed and constructed in the interstices between cultures. Ultimately, *White Teeth* reflects real-world diasporic experiences marked by

psychological, social, and political tensions, emphasizing identity formation as a complex interplay of memory, belonging, and adaptation in a multicultural, postcolonial urban landscape.

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Critiquing the Politics of Development: An Intersectional Insight from J Devika's *Feeling Kerala*

Dr. Sini K.S.

Abstract

Feeling Kerala: An Anthology of Contemporary Malayalam Stories, a translation by J. Devika, brings forth a pulsating encounter of Kerala that is spearheading towards an unprecedented expansion of its horizons in the twenty-first century. Large-scale exposure of women in every avenue has transformed their outlook in family relations, intimacy, bodily experience etc. This has shattered the imperious patriarchal reticence imposed on female bodies. The stories adopted for study are Santhosh Aechikanam's "Rules for Drivers", Dhanya Raj's "Green Room," and Shahina E K's "Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower". "Rules for Drivers" hits hard on the hypocritical progressive Malayali 'reformer-man'. The liberal progressive 'reformer-man' loquaciously exhorts women to burgeon themselves but not at the cost of their interests. Grow, but not by outgrowing the 'reformer-man' is the maxim. 'Green Room' narrates how Kudumbasree groups have aided women, even of the lower middle class, to shackle the structural boundaries and limits of the family and society. It also critiques the malicious tactics women themselves adopt in the race for power. 'Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower' presents a stark, unflinching portrayal of gender-based oppression and the eventual assertion of female agency. The three narratives expose the effort of the conservative male spaces to padlock women and the nuanced effort of the Malayali women to resist the structural and cultural oppression against their individuated selves. They are also a nuanced portrayal of the dilemma of a transitional society. The study adopts intersectional feminism to highlight the complex interplay of factors, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of discrimination and resilience. It suggests a systemic transformation through education to embrace the high development indices that the Kerala Model Development champions

Keywords: Intersectional feminism, Gender orientation, Resistance, Kerala model development.

The southwestern region of India has been the transitway to a global network of relations, not with the official formation of the state, but centuries earlier. Global interactions are evident from the BCE with its spice trade to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Thereafter, the coast has witnessed numerous exchanges irrespective of kingdoms and religious practices.

It has provided a cosmopolitan outlook to the region. All the disparate elements in question - from caste to commodities, skill, public spaces and gender - make Kerala's engagement with modernity polyvalent. The intervention of the religious reformers, missionaries and the freedom fighters in the cultural and political landscape has also guided the riverine state in opening itself to human development.

Since its formation in 1956, Kerala has witnessed structural and conceptual transformation unlike any other state in India. The increasing flow of remittances in the Kerala economy due to the large-scale migration of its working population to foreign countries, especially to Gulf countries, has aided even middle-class families to invest in education. But even then, they were parsimonious in backing girls' education. Even elementary education was uncommon. But with the second phase of development, since 1987, education, irrespective of gender, has become rampant. Women emerged as a major workforce of the land. Working women became a new normal. But the "double shift" (Robinson 5) only exacerbated the gender prejudices. She had to walk a thin line between the conventional familial expectations and her career aspirations. The onset of films panegyrising women as a gentle but responsible workforce demanded her adherence to the gender discourse. This was shackled when family planning incorporated female income into the 'family wage'. The rearrangement of gender roles becomes a necessity, resulting in increased tension in man-woman relationships.

Caste and community reformation in the first half of the twentieth century stimulated the notion that the state had shed caste prejudices. The epithet 'caste-free society' is considered an unintended benefit accrued from the Kerala Model development. But the remnants of discrimination are still identified in all spheres of life. Systemic challenges such as spatial segregation and limited access to resources subtly remove their presence in the public interface. The rampant hate and prejudices against the community are sheathed in the success story of the Kerala model development. But in actuality, the land which boasts of its high literacy, social reforms and land reforms failed to dismantle caste structures. The double-edged sword of caste and gender ensnares women of all classes, especially the middle class, in their ascent to selfhood.

J Devika, a feminist historian, social researcher and translator, in her *Feeling Kerala: An Anthology of Contemporary Malayalam Stories* has translated the stories of the emerging literary voices of Kerala. The stories in the anthology provide a glimpse of a society in flux. Though empirical data about the society are available in plenty from multiple outlets such as

academic journals, testimonies, archives etc, they are all linear inputs. It generally upholds the zeitgeist's sanctioned storylines. But to get a glimpse of the undercurrents that brew in the social and cultural fabric of society, literature remains an indispensable lens. The stories in the anthology reveal the rumblings brewing in a society that is undergoing convulsive transformation. In the translator's introduction, Devika says, "This book aims to bring Kerala- as a living, pulsating entity changing in front of our eyes- to the reader through its short story writers" (x).

The paper aims to read three stories, Santhosh Aechikkanam's "Rules for Drivers", Dhanya Raj's "Green Room," and Shahina E K's "Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower", that would "provide a tour into the heart and soul of contemporary Kerala" (x). Kerala has one of the highest sex ratios in India, reflecting a significant female population. According to the 2011 census, approximately 52% of Kerala's total population is women. Post 2011, Kerala's female population has remained stable or slightly increased. One of the positive indicators of Kerala Model Development is its high literacy rate. Despite Kerala's remarkable 96% female literacy rate, its female workforce participation remains alarmingly low at just 32%. This paradoxical disconnect between education and economic empowerment. But still, education has generated a sense of selfhood in them. Though women often are checked in the perimeters of traditional family, they attempt to outgrow the assertion either with a thud or a whimper.

The stories "Rules for Drivers", "Green Room," and "Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower" portray the "angry young women" (x) struggling against patriarchy, poverty, and prescribed destinies. Savarna norms, religious surveillance, and profit-driven economies intertwine and interact in shaping social identities. This constrains and limits opportunities. Intersectionality has to be incorporated into this feminist struggle to "jointly challenge all aspects of the dominant white supremacist capitalist patriarchy power structure" (Aira & Pascua 6). Women recognise the constraints. But they reject passive victimhood and espouse self-determined action.

Santhosh Aechikkanam's "Rules for Drivers" narrates the quandary of the 'college teacher' husband, Ravichandran and his wife, Akhila. Ravichandran, being a philosophy teacher and writer, wants to reform his wife to suit the salutation 'buddhijeevi' that he carries. Akhila rejects the pretense of reform that masks hypocrisy, refusing to conform to the ideals he seeks to enforce upon her. She is happy with the world she has constructed – immersed in household chores, managing bills, shopping, driving, and savoring popular TV shows. Ravichandran

critiques his wife for being just a wife: "... how long can I carry on with a woman who's hooked to the TV all the time ... obsessed with eating and visiting the Margin Free shops and cutting out recipes from magazines for her fancy cooking" (52). He invites her to his library to improve her mind and thus rise above the middle-class delusion "life is tasty and smooth like a continental dish" (52). Akhila teases his facade of superiority, exposing the hollowness behind his elitist mindset. The 'reformer-man' could not tolerate her contention and tried to whack her. She defies "try lifting your hand and we'll see" (53) and challenges and questions his incapability in acquiring basic life skills "... writing...reading...society...commitment... I know nothing of all that, I admit. But lemme ask – can you drive a car? Change a bulb? Reserve a ticket through the mobile phone?" (53). Akhila left a baffled 'bhudhijivi', who fails to realise "people have their own skills and weaknesses" (54). Ravichandran weaponises education to demean Akhila's interests, reinforcing the stereotype that women's pleasures are frivolous. The high literacy that Kerala boasts of could not eradicate the paternalized system; instead has only 'modernised patriarchy'.

Ravichandran tries to nullify the skills of Akhila by trying to acquire the skill himself and joins "Mother Driving School". His interaction with Ramakrishnan, the driving instructor, spurs him to rethink his stance and arrive at new realizations. Ramakrishnan represents an alternative masculinity. He has learned his lessons from the road. He brushes up on his insights every time he engages with his passengers. Unlike Ravichandran, who holds on to his ego, Ramakrishnan is always ready to unlearn and relearn. "I am like the stone on which different sorts of pollen have fallen ... when we chat ... it brushes off me ... the law, cinema, history ..." (61). This reciprocity is lacking in Ravichandran. The educated Malayali's intellectual veneer is exposed through Ramakrishna's insights. "The truth is that all these cultural leaders and literary people you see on TV ... they are food to admire from afar. ... If you sit next to them and talk with them for a little while, you'll know ... they don't have the sense of life that even we have" (61). It stirs in him the realization of the intellectuals' insecurity who seek indulgence and recognition but express their views cautiously from a secure position.

Boasting about development and literacy has not aided Kerala society in establishing equality, neither in class nor in gender. Ravichandran realises that he has nothing to claim superior to Akhila. He plunges into insecurity and loneliness. Conjugalities was to him a complex interplay of power and calculated strategies among couples. But Ramakrishnan offers him an alternative vision of a relationship beyond power. The story ends with Akhila obtaining

Ravichandran's licence - signifying their reunion and her quiet victory. She refused to be shamed for her tastes. She reclaimed the significance of 'unpaid care work'. Through her defiance, she upheld her selfhood.

When Akhila found her calling as a homemaker, Syamini sought growth and fulfilment beyond the conventional image of a housewife. This desire to have 'self-reliance', 'financial upward mobility', 'women empowerment' got into the minds of the lower middle-class women like Syamini with the self-help groups (SHGs) in Kerala. Kudumbashree has institutionalized SHGs as a powerful tool for women's empowerment, poverty alleviation, and community development. Most of the women who join hands with the activities of Kudumbashree would be housewives from lower-middle-class origins with higher secondary or matriculation-level education. Through the network of SHGs, women's aspirations soar to enter the political arena. Reservation of one-third of electoral seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies ensured the participation of women in grassroots governance. This piqued the ambitious women to broaden their horizons, but it meant toppling down conventional family expectations. In a masterful stroke, Dhanya Raj captures the envious, mediocre husband who knocks over when the wife's ascent threatens the status quo.

The narrative begins with Sudevan musing on Syamini as his support system. He agrees that he has not grabbed any great victory but "carrying on life despite minor scrapes and falls is itself an achievement, is it not?" (83). From 'the monarch of his tiny empire', Syamini moved out to contest and govern the panchayat he resides in. This shattered his 'tiny empire,' and he worked on everything possible, even if it meant cheap ploys to ensure the defeat of his wife. The Kudumbashree platform bemused Sudevan but was unable to see how "making such eatables as acchappam and neyyappam and banana chips and rice murukku, and selling them around" (84) could connect to 'abstruse words' such as 'women empowerment,' 'self-reliance,' and financial upward mobility. He did not bother himself with her involvement in the SHGs, as Syamini getting dressed up to attend a women's gathering would be the gateway to the political arena. From the treasurer of the SHG and women's representative at party meetings, she grew. She transformed herself from a hesitant speaker to a confident orator, making her mark in local body meetings and earning a ticket to contest the panchayat elections in the Poomauthikkunnu ward. This shattered Sudevan's glasshouse. "Syamini, the Housewife had now vanished from my life" (88). He became utterly perplexed at her transformation.

Syamini's autonomy threatened his domestic convenience. He was nonplussed at empty gas cylinders, unpaid bills, unmixed hair dye, etc. His self-image as a 'responsible family member' hinges on Syamini's unpaid labour, which he fails to acknowledge. When Syamini dives into the election campaign, he rolls in sheer frustration. The house challenged him like a war room. If an election campaign could topple his life, winning would raze it to the ground. Not knowing how to grapple with 'changing family life', he decides to scheme against her. He sought the support of his friends, even at the cost of annulling two months' arrears they had at his grocery shop, to sabotage her victory. The transformation of Syamini, "such confidence in her words, so eloquent her body language" (92), left him awed. He deployed underhanded schemes to manoeuvre her defeat. "I went to people who knew us well and dropped sly remarks, nicely packaged, about Syamini's loose ways, her selfishness ... did not forget to indicate ... her peculiar predilections" (93). His regressive misogyny is evident in the success of his orchestrated ploy. He noticed with satisfaction that he could convince people of his wife's avariciousness: "Oh ... so Syamini is such a ... lowlife ... "? (93). After the hectic campaign, on the election eve, exhausted Syamini gets back to the 'comfort of home'. The enervating campaign had cast a shadow on her face. At this, Sudevan, the fragile patriarch, comes with the reassurance "God will never forsake those who persevere" (94). His hypocrisy is nerve-wracking. Sudevan is emblematic of a gendered society which muzzle up women who try to redefine their role. He is just another name for the patriarchy that rigged the game long before she entered it. It also exposes the fissures in the celebrated Kerala Model of Development of higher female participation in governance. There is definitely female participation, but subject to the mediation of male approval.

When Akhila and Syamini fight the regressive modernist, Shahina E K's "Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower" resists the oppression of female bodies across the social spectrum. Even as Kerala prides itself on its literacy, gender parity, and declining fertility rates due to education, the alarming increase in crimes against women casts a shadow over these accomplishments. Women, irrespective of their age, colour, class, caste, or associations with men, are objectified as just bodies. Kerala also holds the distinction of having a crime rate against women that surpasses the national average (National Crime Records Bureau). The female body does not limit itself to adult females but includes kids, young girls and aged women. The oppressor is not always a stranger; more often than not, they come from within the family. It has ripped off the baselines of home, sanctity and dependability. The hollowness

in the indicators of Kerala Model development – success of Kerala women and girl children – is deftly sketched through Shahina’s multiple narratives.

The setting, Mangala Lane, Street No. 10, becomes a microcosm of Kerala’s paradoxical patriarchy. The lane carries within its boundaries cramped lodges, apartment flats and water tankers, becoming an intersection of lower, middle and upper middle-class society. Despite the strata of society, they experience a shared conflict. Joseph’s lodge is the first locale. Waking up to the stench of the neighbourhood, he throws a lecherous glance at the women who have gathered to collect drinking water from the tanker. His disdain for women is evident in reducing them to sexual spectacle: “There she was, the little slut” (267). The sight of her brings to his memory how she has resisted his molestation: “The kick from the little black leg!” (267). Before her look falls on him, he moves away from the window. His reference to “half-grown dark-skinned fruit on her chest that he barely got to squeeze” (267) is indicative of her age and class. Her age mattered little to Joseph, as he saw her only as a physical object to consume.

Joseph is an outsider, but intimate personal spaces also offer no consolation. The cuddle of Ruba’s ‘Uppa’ makes her uncomfortable. She has lodged this grievance with her mother. But as the man who has engaged Ruba’s every whim, has worked his bones out to feed them, and the father who has always cooed and cuddled her daughter, Vahida cannot open herself to incestuous violence. She dismisses her daughter’s suffering with a slap: “Watch those filthy movies and spew nonsense” (268). Her statement indicates her awareness of such things, but to her own family, she cannot admit. The economic role of the man masks his predatory actions. The flashy ‘development cards’ at college-going Rubawane when it cannot safeguard her from the hands that serve the food. Slowly, in the kitchen, Vahida begins to muse. In the rhythm of vegetable cutting and silence, the realisation dawns in: “The enemy is inside the house . . . innocent looking act . . . constant pacing in front of Ruba’s bathroom . . . nudging, holding” (268). The ‘Kitchen table revolution’ takes her to the naked protest.

Gopika, the medical student, on her third day of posting at the forensic department, captures the rancid smell she has never known before. “The body’s decomposed. A child’s” (269). The arresting sight of the mutilation done to the body opens her to the stench of gendered violence in society. The stuck-out genitalia suggested a male child. But the professor declared, “Rape and murder. A girl child, six years old” (270). Her tiny body was the site of gendered

violence: “. . .the bite marks; the torn lips . . . brain that had turned into mus . . . legs unnaturally open” (270). Gopika cannot open to the ‘cadaveric spasm’ – the anatomical explanation of the body. She collapses. This opens to the structural failure of the highly acclaimed education system of the state. The pedagogical framework and the knowledge delivery system focus on the scholastic exchange. It fails to establish a meaningful link with the actuality around. The maggots in the ‘swollen bluish flesh’ are the putrid heart of a bruised society. The child’s arms “raised like in a last resort of self-defence” embody the tragic shortcomings of an ‘enlightened society’. Gopika’s participation in the naked protest symbolizes her rebellion against a society that has long been decomposed.

Ajitha’s teacher’s narrative lay bare the cracks in the much-flaunted education system of the state. She did teach ‘hundreds of children’, but failed to convert literacy to liberation. The liberating power of education eluded both sexes, the oppressed and the oppressors alike. Education has become just a textbook transaction. She could not read the metaphor in Paru’s portrait, ‘a flower in the middle and four bees circling it’, until the petal had fallen. The four bees foreshadow the oppressor she would later encounter in her own flat – her son, Akash. While the institution taught Paaru to draw, it offered no vocabulary to voice her trauma and instilled no sense of compassion in Akash. It came as a shocking revelation to the teacher that her son had attempted to film her naked. It did not end with Akash. Aniruddh, Divakar, and Sudeep each betrayed their family, cousin, mother, and sister - proving that familial bonds are no deterrent to their desires. By smashing the mobile phone, the teacher dismantles the false assurances perpetuated by education and infotainment. The hidden curriculum of patriarchy thrives.

The ideals of education fail to come alive, stretching from the corridors of medical colleges to the streets. But women are not mute spectators or passive acknowledgers. Despite the normalisation of violence and gender oppression, they decide to end the silent endurance. In solidarity, they find strength. They come together in the streets in an act of defiance. They strip naked and march through the streets, forcing men to confront the very bodies they have objectified, violated, and controlled. Their nudity, rather than being an act of submission, becomes a radical reclamation of agency. “A long procession of women, coming up from the end of the lane, very slowly. A seemingly never-ending line of naked women” (276). The voyeuristic gaze has turned powerless. The leering crowd began to weaken. The protest disrupts the social order, challenging the deep-seated misogyny that dictates women’s existence.

It is a poignant metaphor for reclaiming visibility on their own terms, a refusal to be reduced to mere objects of male desire.

The stories, “Green Room”, “Rules for Drivers,” and “Like Wind, Sun, Leaf and Flower” remind Audre Lorde’s statement, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own” (*UN Women*, 2025). It also collectively exposes the deep fissures in Kerala’s celebrated modernity, revealing how patriarchal violence persists beneath the veneer of development, education, and political empowerment. But the stories of oppression have not ended in deep despair but have rather ignited hope. The growing awareness among women about justice and equity is a luminous streak. Regardless of their social standing, the female characters in the stories defy patriarchal safeguards and envision a crescendo of a progressive democratic society.

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Curated Selves: Performance, Visibility, and Identity in Instagram Culture

Keerthana S.

Social media has transformed the ways in which people communicate, interact, and understand themselves. Among the many digital platforms that shape contemporary culture, Instagram occupies a particularly significant place. What began as a simple photo-sharing application has evolved into a space where individuals document experiences, cultivate relationships, and present versions of themselves to a wide audience. Through photographs, reels, captions, stories, and carefully organised profiles, users create digital representations of who they are and who they wish to be. In this environment, identity is no longer something that is simply possessed. Instead, it becomes something that is continuously expressed, negotiated, and reshaped through online interaction.

The importance of Instagram lies in its emphasis on visibility. Everyday experiences that were once private or shared only with close friends can now be presented to hundreds or thousands of people. Studying, exercising, travelling, celebrating achievements, and even ordinary daily routines are transformed into content that can be viewed, liked, commented on, and shared. This shift has important implications for how identity is understood. Instagram does not merely allow people to display who they are. It actively encourages them to think about how they appear to others and how their experiences can be represented online.

One of the most useful ways to understand this phenomenon is through Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that social interaction resembles a theatrical performance. Individuals present themselves before an audience and attempt to influence the impressions others form of them (7). Rather than revealing every aspect of themselves, people selectively present information that helps create favourable impressions. Social life therefore involves continuous acts of impression management.

Although Goffman developed his theory decades before the emergence of social media, his ideas remain highly relevant to Instagram culture. The platform functions as a digital stage where users perform particular versions of themselves. Unlike face-to-face interactions, Instagram allows users to carefully edit and curate their self-presentation. Photographs can be filtered, captions can be rewritten, and content can be deleted if it does not fit the desired image. Users decide which experiences become visible and which remain hidden. As a result,

Instagram profiles often present a carefully constructed narrative rather than a complete record of everyday life.

This process is especially visible in productivity culture. Study accounts frequently feature neatly organised desks, colourful notes, productivity planners, and aesthetically pleasing study spaces. These images communicate more than educational activity. They suggest discipline, ambition, organisation, and academic success. Similarly, fitness accounts often emphasise dedication, self-control, and personal improvement through workout videos and transformation photographs. Travel content communicates adventure and freedom, while lifestyle accounts often project happiness, balance, and creativity. Through such representations, users construct identities that can be recognised and admired by others.

However, understanding Instagram merely as a space for self-presentation does not fully explain how identity operates online. Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a deeper perspective. Butler argues that identity is not a fixed essence that exists before social expression. Instead, identity is produced through repeated actions and performances (Butler 25). In her discussion of gender, Butler famously argues that identity emerges through what people repeatedly do rather than from an inner and unchanging core.

Applied to Instagram, Butler's theory suggests that users do not simply reveal a pre-existing identity through social media. Instead, identity is gradually formed through repeated acts of posting, sharing, commenting, and engaging with others. A user who consistently posts study-related content begins to be recognised as hardworking and academically focused. Someone who regularly shares fitness content becomes associated with discipline and healthy living. Through repetition, these performances create the impression of a stable and coherent identity (Butler 25). The Instagram profile therefore becomes not only a place where identity is displayed but also a space where identity is actively produced.

This perspective helps explain why social media can feel so closely connected to personal identity. Many users invest significant time and effort into maintaining a particular online presence because that presence becomes part of how they understand themselves. The repeated performance of specific interests, values, and lifestyles contributes to the construction of digital selfhood. Identity emerges through practice rather than existing independently of it.

The work of Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin further strengthens this argument. In their study of online identity construction, they argue that users often

communicate identity through visible signs rather than direct self-description. People frequently “show rather than tell” who they are online (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 1816). Instead of explicitly stating that they are disciplined, successful, adventurous, or creative, they communicate these qualities through images, activities, interests, and social connections.

Instagram intensifies this tendency because it privileges visual communication. A graduation photograph may communicate achievement. A travel photograph may suggest independence and exploration. A carefully organised study space may signify dedication and ambition. Through these images, users create symbolic representations of identity that audiences can easily recognise and interpret. Identity is increasingly communicated through visual signs rather than lengthy descriptions.

The growing importance of visual culture on Instagram can also be understood through the work of Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym. They argue that selfies should not simply be dismissed as acts of vanity. Instead, selfies function as forms of communication through which people create meaning and establish relationships (Senft and Baym 1589). A selfie is not merely a photograph; it is a social act that invites recognition, interpretation, and response.

Every image posted on Instagram contributes to a broader narrative about the user. A photograph of a morning workout, a study session, a favourite book, or a holiday destination may appear ordinary, yet each image communicates something about identity. Through repeated visual representations, users construct narratives about who they are and how they wish to be seen. Over time, these images form a coherent digital persona that audiences can recognise and engage with.

The popularity of aesthetic content further highlights the role of visual culture in identity construction. Many users devote considerable effort to creating visually appealing profiles. Colour schemes, editing styles, image composition, and overall profile organisation become important aspects of self-presentation. A minimalist profile may communicate sophistication and simplicity, while a colourful feed may suggest creativity and enthusiasm. Visual style becomes a language through which identity is expressed.

Instagram is also an important site for the performance of femininity. Beauty tutorials, skincare routines, fashion content, and lifestyle reels frequently present particular ideas about what femininity should look like. Butler’s theory is especially useful here because it emphasises that gender is not a fixed identity but something that is repeatedly performed (Butler 25).

Through makeup trends, fashion choices, poses, and lifestyle content, users participate in performances that are recognised and validated by others.

At the same time, Instagram provides opportunities for alternative expressions of femininity. Many creators challenge conventional beauty standards and gender expectations by presenting different forms of self-expression. As a result, the platform functions both as a space where traditional ideas of femininity are reproduced and as a space where they can be questioned and reimaged. This tension reflects the broader complexity of identity formation in digital culture.

Another important feature of Instagram culture is the growing emphasis on authenticity. In recent years, many users have embraced casual photographs, photo dumps, behind-the-scenes content, and personal reflections as alternatives to highly polished posts. Such content is often presented as more genuine and more representative of real life. The desire for authenticity reflects a growing awareness that social media content is frequently curated and selective.

Yet authenticity on Instagram is more complicated than it first appears. Even content that appears spontaneous often involves careful decisions about what to share and what to leave out. Users still select photographs, choose captions, and decide when content should be posted. Authenticity therefore becomes another form of performance rather than the opposite of performance. People perform relatability, vulnerability, and imperfection just as others perform success, beauty, or achievement.

The construction of identity on Instagram is shaped not only by users but also by the technological systems that organise visibility on the platform. Ted Striphas's concept of algorithmic culture helps explain this process. Striphas argues that contemporary culture increasingly relies on computational systems to sort, classify, and organise information (Striphas 395). Algorithms influence what users see, what becomes popular, and which forms of content receive attention.

Instagram's algorithm plays a significant role in shaping digital selfhood. Content that receives likes, comments, shares, and saves is more likely to be promoted to wider audiences. As a result, users often adapt their behaviour to satisfy both audiences and algorithms. Posting schedules, trending audio clips, visual styles, and content formats are frequently chosen with visibility in mind. Users therefore perform not only for other people but also for the platform itself (Striphas 396).

This pursuit of visibility influences the kinds of identities that become prominent online. Certain forms of beauty, productivity, humour, and lifestyle content receive greater exposure because they align with platform expectations and audience preferences. Although Instagram often celebrates individuality, many users participate in similar trends and aesthetic conventions. The desire for visibility encourages conformity as well as self-expression.

Validation is another central feature of Instagram culture. In face-to-face interactions, social approval is often communicated through conversation and personal relationships. On Instagram, approval is frequently measured through numbers. Likes, comments, follower counts, views, and shares become visible indicators of recognition. These metrics provide immediate feedback regarding how audiences respond to particular performances.

Such feedback can shape how users understand themselves. High engagement may create feelings of confidence and recognition, while low engagement may lead to disappointment or self-doubt. Users often analyse audience responses and adjust future content accordingly. Validation becomes closely connected to visibility, creating a cycle in which self-presentation is continuously monitored and refined.

The performative nature of Instagram is particularly visible in the representation of romantic relationships. Couple photographs, anniversary posts, holiday reels, and public declarations of affection have become common features of social media culture. These posts allow users to share meaningful experiences, but they also transform private relationships into public performances.

Relationship content often communicates happiness, stability, and emotional fulfilment. Such representations may be entirely genuine, yet they remain selective. Users usually share moments of celebration and affection while leaving conflict, routine experiences, and difficulties outside public view. As a result, audiences often encounter idealised representations of intimacy rather than complete accounts of lived relationships.

The same pattern appears across many forms of content. Productivity posts communicate ambition. Fitness content suggests discipline. Travel photographs represent adventure and freedom. Relationship content signifies happiness and emotional connection. Through these performances, users create narratives about who they are and who they aspire to become. Identity becomes closely connected to visibility, recognition, and audience interpretation.

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that everything on Instagram is fake. Many users genuinely share important experiences, achievements, and emotions. The issue is not whether content is true or false. Rather, it is the way social media encourages experiences to be presented in forms that attract attention, engagement, and recognition. Even authentic experiences become shaped by the logic of visibility.

Instagram therefore illustrates a broader transformation in contemporary culture. Identity is no longer understood solely as a private matter. Instead, it develops through ongoing interaction with audiences, platforms, and technological systems. Users continuously create and recreate themselves through images, captions, stories, and engagement practices. Selfhood becomes an ongoing project rather than a fixed reality.

Ultimately, Instagram functions as a performative space where identity is continuously constructed, negotiated, and validated. Drawing on the ideas of Goffman, Butler, Zhao, Senft and Baym, and Striplhas, it becomes clear that digital selfhood emerges through a complex interaction between self-presentation, repetition, visual communication, audience engagement, and algorithmic visibility. Instagram does not simply provide a platform for expressing identity. It actively shapes how identity is understood, performed, and recognised in contemporary digital culture. In a world increasingly organised around visibility and connection, identity is not merely lived. It is continuously performed, interpreted, and remade through digital interaction.

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From History to Culture: Impact of Myth on the Creation of Identity

Ibin Issac

Abstract

This paper examines the role of myth in the creation of human identity by considering its internal and external dimensions. The characters in myths, usually gods, goddesses, warriors, and heroes are often associated with the creation and maintenance of elements of nature, as well as with physical, emotional, and practical aspects of human existence. Identity is understood as a marker of how individuals perceive themselves, how they are viewed by others, and how they construct a sense of self through the sociological and cultural conditions of life. The paper first discusses the general characteristics of myth and then examines its relationship with the formation of identity. It further considers how collective and individual myths may affect the psyche by influencing, introducing, or modifying ego ideals through religious and cultural fantasies. The study also explores the ways in which myths encourage identification and sublimation. Ultimately, the paper argues that mythical stories preserved through history and incorporated into culture can contribute, often unconsciously, to the formation of individual and collective identities.

Keywords: Identity, Myth, Culture, Psyche, Imagination

As a culture, humans tend to define themselves and one another through identity. Although individuals hold different ideologies, they also inherit certain traits and assumptions from the past. History is connected with culture, and culture is, in many ways, connected with myths. These myths have played a central role in shaping identity. The emergence of myth reflects human faith and the ways in which people interpret their existence.

Humans interpret their world and their place in it through myth. History reveals that mythical stories, which may appear to have existed forever, were also constructed for various political and social purposes and have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this process. Myths communicate concrete and abstract ideas in relatively simple forms and retell accounts of the distant past in a lucid manner. They speak about creation and often function as symbols of human behaviour. Knowledge of a myth is presented as knowledge of origins and may therefore be used to explain, control, or apply particular practices. Such knowledge can be transmitted through ritual, either by retelling the myth or by ritually justifying it.

The self is formed through interactions with others and within social, cultural, and political contexts. Self-formation begins with the recognition of one's own image and develops through stories about the past and present and through interpretations of events and responsibilities. Individuals contribute to these narratives about themselves and are influenced by the lessons they convey. This connection helps explain the relationship between myth, religion, and ritual. Religious ceremonies recreate mythical time and thereby renew it. Myths are closely associated with religious life because they can provide refuge from present concerns by invoking a sacred past. Myth is therefore part of a cultural context that may have a direct or indirect relationship with religion. Not all myths are religious; some are constructed within communities, yet they can exert considerable influence on individual and collective consciousness.

The mind is central to the construction of identity. Identity can be understood as a mental phenomenon shaped by cultural influence, upbringing, beliefs, and activities. Individuals internalise images and ideas received through culture and may imitate the narratives and values associated with them, believing that these ideas provide guidance for living a good life.

The study focuses on how history and culture shape identity through the prominent factor of myth. It examines how myths influence moral values and how the same myths can also mislead individuals while transmitting culturally and religiously sanctioned ideas.

Myths are traditional stories about gods, goddesses, and heroes. They often explain the creation of the world and its possible end. Some myths transmit moral values from one generation or culture to another, while others involve prophecy and concepts such as sin. Religious and nonreligious myths may contain supernatural or nonsupernatural elements and are often presented as events associated with the distant past, thereby creating a connection with history. Humans move forward by interpreting and revising the past, yet some stories transferred from one culture or society to another remain embedded within communities. Such stories influence how people understand who they are and how they should live, thereby shaping identity. As these narratives are transmitted across generations, their importance may change. Historical interpretations can be altered through documents and later understandings, and mythical narratives may undergo similar processes of reinterpretation. Nevertheless, some ideologies associated with myths remain deeply rooted in culture and are difficult to displace. In this way, myth can contribute to the formation of social ideology, with individuals encountering such ideas from childhood and adolescence.

Religion plays a role in the creation and preservation of some myths, while others are constructed within society. Ideologies preserved by communities may become common within particular cultural contexts, although their effects vary across religions and societies. Some myths have positive social effects, whereas others may reinforce negative assumptions. Because culturally embedded beliefs can be resistant to change, problematic myths may persist. Certain myths are specific to particular regions and may appear unacceptable to people from other cultural contexts. The colonial period provides an example of how cultural ideas can acquire myth-like status. The notion that the West is superior and that whatever the West accepts is necessarily best for Eastern societies became deeply embedded across generations. Such a belief functioned culturally as a myth, contributing to feelings of inferiority and continuing comparison even after colonial rule ended.

Penelope Lively, in “Oral Histories: A Sense of Identity,” states, “We all need a past—that’s where our sense of identity comes from” (Das). She also connects memory with the past. Such memories are related to the cultural contexts in which myths operate. Identity is often understood through the relationship between body and mind, and the study of mind can therefore contribute to an understanding of identity. Stories contain information and values that can be transmitted from individuals to communities. Because myth is narrated as story, its ideas may become embedded in collective memory. The psyche may consequently be shaped by myths, leading people to accept certain ideas as true and to regard adherence to values embedded in those narratives as an appropriate way of life. Myths, whether ancient or more recently constructed, can therefore influence individual identity, and their narratives may transform individuals at different points in their lives.

Myths often provide explanations for uncertainties in the world that cannot be scientifically verified within the framework of the narratives themselves. One well-known example is the story of Adam and Eve and the associated concept of original sin. Christian doctrine understands original sin as a condition of sin into which human beings are born (“Original Sin”). This concept has been transmitted through religious documents and oral traditions and has had both positive and negative effects. The concept of sin can influence individual identity by shaping how people understand their actions and responsibilities. Similar concepts may also appear in other religious and mythological traditions, where they become embedded in cultural systems and influence individual understandings of life.

Creation myths and narratives about how God or other creators brought the world into existence have also influenced identity. Many creation myths share structural similarities and present recurring concepts. In numerous traditions, creation involves the emergence of heaven and earth. Heaven is often imagined as a sacred or paradisiacal realm associated with a joyful existence beyond ordinary human experience. The contrast between heaven and earth, together with beliefs in an afterlife, can shape the identity of religious individuals by encouraging particular ethical and spiritual orientations.

The ancient Egyptian community believed in the resurrection of the body and in everlasting life (“Egyptian Civilization”). According to this belief, life after death required particular conditions: “The body had to be preserved through mummification and given a properly furnished tomb with everything needed for life in the afterworld” (“Egyptian Civilization”). Thus, beliefs about the afterlife influenced individuals who lived within that cultural context. When the Romans ruled Egypt, however, these beliefs gradually changed. Although contemporary Egyptians retain knowledge of these cultural roots, the author argues that such beliefs no longer have the same influence on present-day identity.

Myths are often associated with narratives originating before modern technological and scientific developments, and their historical claims may not always be verifiable. Their continuing existence therefore also depends on imagination. Individuals may interpret or reconstruct stories according to their perspectives, giving them meanings that operate within the mind. Imagination creates worlds, visions, and ideas beyond what is immediately visible. According to Merriam-Webster, imagination is “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (“Imagination”).

Imagination does not necessarily portray a real image; it can also produce representations of things that are unreal or not directly experienced. It is connected with creativity and knowledge and contributes to the formation of ideas. Listening to a story is an imaginative process that helps structure thoughts and ideas. It stimulates the mind and the quest for knowledge. As humans question the ideas that arise in their minds, these questions can stimulate cultural awareness, which may contribute to the formation of identity. The story of Adam and Eve, for example, is transmitted through written and oral narratives and is mentally represented by readers and listeners. The characters and events are given form through imagination, and concepts such as sin can consequently be connected with the real world and transformed into ideologies that are reflected in identity.

Creation stories can therefore function as imaginative accounts through which people understand the universe and its origins. Individuals may imagine the universe as having been created by a creator and may consequently develop a sense of fear or reverence toward that creator. This demonstrates the power of imagination. Whether the imagined figure is understood as real or unreal, people may experience its presence through the imaginative process. Imagination enables humans to think about the past, present, and future and to conceive of concepts beyond what is immediately known.

The fear of God can be understood, within this argument, as a result of imagination. A concept can emerge from uncertainty and subsequently restructure an individual's understanding of reality. Self-discovery is therefore one reason for the persistence of mythical narratives. Imagination can also produce cultural binaries that encourage self-examination and access to feelings, thoughts, emotions, and understandings below conscious levels. Gender roles, too, can be shaped through imaginative and cultural processes.

Gender roles are created through historical and mythological ideas. When Simone de Beauvoir writes, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (283), she raises the question of the construction of gender identity and argues that femininity is a product of civilisation rather than an expression of essential differences between men and women. A woman is gradually shaped by her social situation and upbringing. The *Second Sex* can thus be considered in relation to the cultural narratives through which gender is understood. Historical and mythical stories can reinforce the value of a two-gender system and may also contribute to the subordination of women. Such ideas can become embedded in cultural systems and reinforce patriarchal structures. Society may compel individuals to conform to gender roles because those roles are reproduced within cultural narratives. The story of Adam and Eve, for instance, has been interpreted as portraying Eve as subordinate to Adam because she was created after and from him (Milne). Within this interpretation, Eve is also associated with Adam's disobedience. Mary is subsequently presented in Christian tradition as an ideal woman, and patriarchal interpretations of biblical narratives have influenced representations of femininity. Through repeated narratives, history and culture can unconsciously impose ideas that contribute to a collective ideology and are reflected in identity.

The ancient Egyptians' belief in an afterlife can likewise be examined through the stories transmitted by their ancestors. Such narratives influenced customs and beliefs. In "The Great

Hymn to the Aten,” composed during the reign of Akhenaten, the pharaoh’s wife Nefertiti is described as “living and youthful for ever and ever.” Literary works from ancient Egypt therefore provide evidence of the cultural importance of beliefs about life, death, and continuity.

Ideas transmitted through history evolve within memory. Memory contributes to the development of the mind, while internalised ideas can influence behaviour and ideology. These ideologies may then be reflected in identity. The heaven-and-earth concept and beliefs in an afterlife recur across cultures, although their forms differ. Reflections of identity, including gender, disability, and cultural identities, can also be connected to inherited forms of communication and cultural memory. Shared imagination can create a continuing symbolic universe. For example, people may fear ghosts even when they do not consciously accept their existence. Such fear may arise from pre-existing beliefs stored in the subconscious. Historically transmitted myths and stories can therefore shape consciousness and, consequently, identity.

The relationship between identity and myth can be understood primarily through history and culture. Myth can be considered a widespread cultural phenomenon whose content varies according to the perspectives of particular communities and the influences that have shaped them over time. People often seek identity by looking to the past, and the past provides narratives through which they understand their origins. Religious, nonreligious, and culturally specific myths can therefore become part of inherited identity. Individuals may preserve ideas transmitted by their ancestors, and these ideas can become integrated into everyday life. Preserved in memory, such narratives become representations of the past through which images of identity are created.

Identity created through imagination, whether gender, cultural, or social identity—is flexible and unstable, although certain concepts may persist. Beliefs concerning the afterlife, including practices such as mummification in ancient Egyptian society, changed through cultural interaction. Some ideas disappeared from particular regions, while others remained rooted in cultural memory. The psyche mediates between memory, ideology, and imagination, and memories may undergo transformation throughout life. History provides an understanding of the past, while myths provide narratives through which mysteries of the past are interpreted. As cultural constructs, myths can acquire a shared reality. Individuals may read a myth as literal divine truth, as nonliteral symbolism, or simply as a literary text; interpretation therefore varies according to perspective.

Science and technology also influence how existing myths are understood. Human reasoning enables individuals to respond to changing ideologies. Myths may continue to function as mysteries even when people attempt to identify the realities behind them. Some cultural myths may eventually be forgotten, while the concepts associated with them remain embedded in collective memory.

Unexplained questions, such as the origin of the universe and the emergence of humanity, have often been addressed through myth. The human quest for explanations can produce concepts and restrictions that influence identity. The desire to discover reality is ongoing. Ideas inherited from ancestors have shaped human understanding, but new discoveries can alter those understandings and produce new concepts by challenging earlier assumptions. Consequently, myths may evolve into new forms. Such evolution can revise existing norms and contribute to the development of new social and individual identities, offering possibilities for change and hope.

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The Intersection of Cognitive and Emotional Poetics in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*: A Cognitive Disability Studies Perspective

Sona Mathew

Cognitive Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that focuses on understanding and addressing the experiences and needs of people with cognitive disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, and acquired brain injuries which accounts for a range of cognitive experiences. The field encompasses a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, philosophy, and disability studies. It emphasizes the importance of valuing the voices and perspectives of people with cognitive disabilities, and the need to challenge traditional notions of intelligence, competence, and capacity. Cognitive Disability Studies explores topics such as the social and cultural construction of disability, the impact of disability on identity and social participation, the ethics of care and support, and the role of technology in supporting people with cognitive disabilities. The field also has a practical focus, aiming to improve the lives of people with cognitive disabilities by advocating for their rights, developing inclusive policies and practices, and creating opportunities for self-determination and empowerment.

The paper, exploring the interdisciplinary field of cognitive disability studies, intends to close-read Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) to demonstrate how the author incorporates cognitive and emotional elements. Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a unique exploration of the cognitive and emotional world of a young boy with autism spectrum disorder. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects social communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors, involving emotional disabilities like difficulty managing and expressing emotions. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy or "15 years, 3 months and 3 days" as he puts it in his novel, who has exceptional mathematical skills but struggles with social interaction and emotional expression. He introduces himself, "My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7507" (2).

Christopher's mentor Siobhan asked him to write something which he would want to read himself. Mostly, he reads about maths and science. He does not like proper novels but

has a taste for murder mystery novels. So, he starts writing a murder mystery novel. Wellington, Mrs Shears' dog, is found dead with a garden fork thrustured upon it. Mrs Shears is a neighbour and family friend. Police arrived to investigate and a policeman took hold of his arm. He does not like people touching him. He hits the policeman, gets arrested and gets a caution. His father warns him to stay out of another people's business which he cannot understand properly. He continues to ask questions to neighbours. His father gets mad about this and takes away the notebook on which he used to write the novel. While searching for the book, he gets some letters addressed to him. All those letters were written by his mother, whom he was told, died and cremated two years ago. Reading those letters were overwhelming for Christopher, he feels giddy, his stomach hurts and he throws up on the bed. His father confesses that he killed Wellington.

Christopher realizes his father is a liar and a murderer. His analytic thought process gave him only one plausible idea where he could feel safe, which was going to live with his mother in London. He gets lost in the town but by moving in a spiral and walking clockwise, he is back in track. He gets on train to London, manages to get off in London, cuts off trails of policemen, escape death, buys a map and reaches his mother's place. But he has to come back to appear for his Maths A level exams, reconnects to his father gradually.

Christopher's unique cognitive style is reflected in the style and structure of the novel. Christopher sees the world in a very literal, logical way, and the novel reflects this in its structure and language. The chapters are numbered with prime numbers, and the narrative is presented in a linear, cause-and-effect style that reflects Christopher's analytical thought process. A high five is the only comfortable physical contact he could make with others. He cannot understand jokes.

Weak central coherence theory suggests that individuals with certain developmental or cognitive disorders, such as autism spectrum disorders, have reduced ability to process information holistically. They show excellent attention to details, but fail to integrate them into a whole. Heightened attention to details both in perception and memory is universal to autistic brains. This important cognitive style is aptly placed in the narrative. The signboards Christopher saw are incorporated in the narrative. Christopher compares his brain to a computer. "When I am in a new place, because I see everything, it is like when a computer is doing too many things at the same time and the central processor unit is blocked up and there isn't any space left to think about other things" (177).

Attention to details alone does not produce talent. It is a part of evolutionary force which results in escalated systemization. Environmental systematizing is another part of Asperger's Syndrome. Systematizing means a drive to create and analyse systems. Christopher does not like it when the things around him change. "It makes me feel dizzy and sick if someone has moved the sofa and the chairs around in the living room or the doining room" (60). Mrs Shears did it once and he got cross and then started groaning.

Christopher's memory is different from other neurotypical individuals. He relies on visual, auditory and olfactory information. He describes his memory: "My memory is like a film. That is why I am good at remembering things, ... what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack" (96).

Christopher finds dogs predictable and people confusing. He writes in his book, "You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating." (4) Also, dogs don't tell lies because they cannot talk. Christopher writes "I find people confusing" (19). This is because "people can do a lot of talking without using any words." Another important reason he lists is that people talk using metaphors, which are lies.

Christopher cannot tell lies, because of his unique cognitive capacity. He reasons, "there is only ever one thing which happened at a particular time and a particular place" (24). There are infinite number of things that didn't happen at that time that place. Christopher writes "And if I think about something which didn't happen I start thinking about all other things which didn't happen" (24). He is not interested in proper novels because these are things which did not happen. He lacks imaginative capacity in a way, he says "Other people have pictures in their heads too. But they are different because the pictures in my head are all pictures of things which really happened. But other people have pictures in their heads of things which aren't real and didn't happen" (98).

People with autism have difficulty interacting with strangers, even in familiar situations and especially in unfamiliar or overwhelming environments. "I do not like strangers because I do not like people I have never before. They are hard to understand" (45). Christopher takes a long time to get used to people he does not know. When there is a new staff at school, he watches them for weeks until he feels like they are safe. "Then I ask them questions about themselves, like they have pets or what is their favourite colour and what do they know about Apollo space missions and I get them to draw a plan of their house and I ask them what kind

of a car they drive, so I get to know them” (46). Christopher shows is not absence of rational agency, but an altered presence of it.

Christopher is particularly talented in numerical system. He solves quadratic equations to calm himself, follows mathematical columns in newspapers, is obsessed with train timetables, prime numbers and so on. His nonverbal ability in mathematics is at a higher level than his communication and social skills, which he is expected of. He could do powers upto 2^{45} but has difficulties in figuring out what other people think and their emotions.

At the same time, the novel is also a powerful exploration of Christopher’s emotional world. Through Christopher’s interactions with his family, his teacher, and the people he meets during his investigation of the dog’s death, we get a sense of the intense emotions he experiences, even if he struggles to express them in a typical way. The novel also addresses themes such as trust, betrayal, and love. Christopher struggles with intense emotions that arise out of social interaction which he tries to grapple in his own way - analytical thought process.

“Emotions are openings into social and material world” (Riedner 704). Many expressions portrayed in everyday life is subtle. Children with autism is able to identify prototypic emotional facial expressions. Everyday emotional practices are perceived as complex sites of information which are often left overlooked. Siobhan is a teacher and mentor to Christopher. She is a supportive presence in Christopher’s life, helping him navigate the challenges of his autism and encouraging him to pursue his interests and passions. Throughout the novel, Christopher keeps Siobhan informed of his progress as he investigates the mystery of the dead dog and uncovers secrets about his family.

Autistic children is unable to form a productive and dialectical affective connection with people. “Relating emotionally to others presents a major challenge to individuals with autism as they maneuver through the social world” (Rump 1434). These individuals are not capable of the identification and reciprocation of emotional cues. Siobhan is an important figure in Christopher’s life and helps him navigate the complexities of the world around him. He recounts, eight years ago, Siobhan showed him a picture which is an emoji and he knew it meant ‘sad’. Then she showed another, which he knew that it meant ‘happy’. He relates to these pictures, writing in his book that he was sad when he found the dead dog and he felt happy when he read about space missions. Siobhan continued to show other emojis and he was unable to say what these meant. So he made Siobhan write down what these faces meant and kept the

paper in his pocket. He took it out everytime he couldn't process people's faces. But it was very difficult to decide from the diagrams because people's faces move very quickly. He told Siobhan this and as a reply, she drew a confounded face emoji and added that him doing so must have made people feel like this picture. He tore up the original paper and threw it away. Then onwards, if he didn't understand what someone is saying and their facial expression, he would either ask them what it is or simply walk away.

In this novel, Christopher turns into a case of high functioning autism because of the intense emotions he feels. His emotions are an active means of altering the course of his life. On onset of the novel, we see that Christopher is aligned with his father. He repeatedly analyses latter's acts and concludes whether father is angry or happy. His father is aware of the sensory processing disorders associated with Autism and what triggers Christopher. The latter keeps record of the repetition of signs and tries to deduce emotional cues. When he was enquiring about Wellington's death, which his father warned not to, he realizes that father is enraged about the whole business. "I could tell that he was angry because he was shouting" (27) He often fails in the mission of predicting the emotional environment from repetitive behaviour. When father realized that Christopher came to know about the affair of Mr. Shears and mother, he was outraged but Christopher couldn't sense it. "I didn't realise that he was angry because he wasn't shouting" (101).

When Christopher learns that his father killed Wellington, Mrs Shears' dog, father turns into an object of fear. "In curious Incident, Christopher has lost his trust in his father whom he comes to perceive both as a deceiver and animal killer." (Siegelman 54). First, he tries to calm himself with mathematical pursuits. "I doubled 2s in my head because it made me feel calmer. i got to 33,554,432 which is 2^{25} , which was not very much because I've got to 2^{45} before, but my brain wasn't working very well." (149) After thinking through the cruel act committed by father, he tried to calm himself by doubling 2s again, but couldn't get past 2^{15} .

"Emotions, as rhetorics, produce affects in particular cultural and personal contexts. Emotions are persuasive in the material ways in which they produce our very modes of life" (Riedner 703). The extension of intense emotions onto the relationship with father leads Christopher, in theoretical terms, in realizing agency and independence. Fear has 'transformative and generative effects on bodies and identities'. The fear he felt was intense. He runs away from the house. He writes, "I was frightened in two different ways. One way

was being frightened of being far away from a place I was used to, and the other...being near where father lived, and they were in inverse proportion to one another, so the total fear remained constant”(168). Emotion of fear has played an integral part in realizing the self in Christophers’s life. It has unearthed the inherent power to rebuild life. He is not a passive object of compassion anymore, but a hero who “. . .hero leave the known world and and encounter either depths or heights or distances he previously could not have imagined” (Siegelman 54).

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is a masterful exploration of the interplay between cognitive and emotional poetics. One of the most striking aspects of the novel is the way in which Haddon uses Christopher’s unique cognitive style to create a compelling narrative. Haddon’s use of Christopher’s unique cognitive style to create a compelling narrative is balanced by his sensitive portrayal of Christopher’s emotional world, resulting in a deeply moving and thought-provoking novel. He puts his emphasis on the narrative structure in order to maintain the agency that is required for selfhood. The author also exhorts readers to view individuals like Christopher as not passive objects of care but as intuitive agents who depart from the standard norms of personhood and inhabit the world in a different way. Micropolitics of personal feelings has led the individual to attain agency. “... I am going to go to university in another town. ... And then I will get a First Class Honours Degree and I will become a scientist. And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything.” (267-268)

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Miracle in Kuantan

Archna Sahni

It was rare for an Indian family, in the 1970s, to have the opportunity to live outside of India. This is exactly what happened with our family. My father, a banker working for State Bank of India in Delhi, was offered the opportunity to go on deputation to Malaysia, as a trainer. He would be required to set up a training school for novice bankers for Bank Bhumiputra in Kuala Lumpur, and teach them, besides the various branches of banking, subjects such as personnel management and organizational behaviour. It is because of my father's brave acceptance of this opportunity that I spent the best four years of my childhood in Kuala Lumpur and consider them the golden phase of my life.

I can still recall the hot and humid air surround me like a bubble when we landed at the Kuala Lumpur airport. The airport! I had never seen such big cars! Everything looked so organized and clean, not like the dusty roads of Rajori Garden in Old Delhi where we lived before planting ourselves in this green, clean land. Gone was the chaos of rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and bicycles jostling with cars and buses on noisy streets.

For a sevenyear old who had encountered strange, beautiful creatures and places only in children's books or fairy tales narrated by her school teacher in New Era Public School, stepping into this new land was nothing short of entering the magical world of a living fairy tale. We were allotted a spacious one-story, three-bedroom apartment in a housing complex whose residents were ex-patriates like us. My older sister and I shared a bedroom while our younger four year old brother had a room to himself. We were suddenly surrounded by machines and gadgets. My brother shared his room with a washing machine. Next appeared a vacuum cleaner in the kitchen closet, and a hair dryer on my mother's dressing table. We acquired an oven, which was proudly displayed on the counter surrounding the dining table. After nearly half a decade, my mother, who is nothing short of a Master Chef or should I say Mistress Chef, still bakes cakes, cookies, and eclairs in this faithful oven from yesteryears.

It was probably within a few weeks of taking possession of our apartment that our family went on a long trip across this wondrous land with a driver provided by the bank. His name was Kisanan. There were many beautiful beach resorts and cities that we visited. One particular resort stands out in my memory. The beach resort at Kuantan. I learnt two new words the day we arrived at this resort. 'Chalet' meaning a hotel. I learnt this from the

brochure in our room. The second I stumbled upon when a couple walking on the beach asked me, “Do you know where the ‘lavatory’ is?” “*Lemon tree?*” I echoed back to them. “Umm, no. Bathroom...toilet,” they finally added, after a meandering exchange leading nowhere. To this day I wonder why they used such a difficult word when a simpler one existed, and moreover, why they did not ask an adult for directions to the washroom.

My father would do yoga in his white kurta pyjama early in the morning on the beach. We three kids would dig holes in the beach sand and marvel at the sea water seeping into it, and adventure into the waters up till our knees with glee on our faces. I would collect shells from the sea shore, taking time to admire an unusual or pretty shell. My mother wore saris at this resort, I recall her looking so graceful in them. On one of the days she wore a sari of pastel colours with a floral pattern and sported a white bindi that glistened in the sun. That day she asked a passerby on the beach to take a photo of us three kids with her. It was much later during our stay in Kuala Lumpur that my mother would start wearing bell bottoms and maxis, as was the trend in the late 1970s.

Walking back to the chalet, I saw my four-year old brother throw a kitten into a shallow pool. It was not a swimming pool, but more of a decorative shallow pond. Water splashed around him. I ran towards the pool to save the kitten who was struggling to stay afloat in the water. I bent forward and pulled her out, then took her to our motel room to find a towel to dry her with. Later that day, I looked around for the kitten’s mother, hoping to unite her with it, but there was none in sight.

I kept the kitten close to me, and she reciprocated by following me around. A bond seemed to have formed between us. I revelled in the feel of her soft fur, and loved the way she would play with me, gently petting my legs with her small paws, at times curling her tail around one of my legs. I don’t recall what I fed her for the next day or two. I vaguely recall asking a waiter for bread and milk, and he obliged. Perhaps I fed her mushrooms as well. I recall my mother sent out my sister and I to pluck mushrooms from the lawn outside our chalet one early morning. She must have known they were safe to eat, for she cooked them Indian style for lunch in the kitchenette that was provided in our chalet.

I was acutely aware of the fact that the next day we were to leave Kuantan and head back home. I recall this moment clearly as if it were yesterday. It has played out in my mind innumerable times, not only because it is a precious memory, but because to my adult mind

seeking to understand its own evolution, it serves as a marker about the kind of world view I already possessed at the age of seven.

My brother and I were sitting in the backseat of our car. I held the kitten on my lap and was stroking her tender head. My father was in the front seat with the driver. My mother and sister were nowhere in sight. I had already made numerous requests to both my parents for taking the kitten home with us as a pet, and the answer was a resounding 'no' each time. Who will care for her? It's a lot of work. "I will take care of her," I answered each time. Hot tears rolled down my eyes at the thought of leaving the kitten behind. I had grown attached to the tiny creature, and I wondered what would become of her as she did not appear to have a mother or siblings. As the tears rolled down my eyes, I told my brother, "If you let your tears fall on the kitten's head along with mine, a miracle will take place." I let my tears fall down on the kitten's soft head. Seeing me cry, my brother started to cry and let his tears fall on the kitten sitting on my lap.

I asked my father yet again, "Can I please keep the kitten as a pet? Pleeease Papa?" This time, the answer was "Okay *beta*, keep her!" When we reached our home in Kuala Lumpur, I named my pet 'Kitty.' My first pet. My first pet with an unimaginative name. To this day, I believe it was the purity of my heart and the sincerity of my longing for a pet that brought about the miracle. It is not only sages and spiritual adults who believe in a moral universe. It appears that at the tender age of seven, I did too.

The Politics of Purity: Menstrual Shame, Social Control and Counter Storytelling in *Ayali*

Dr. Deepa R.

Abstract

This paper examines menstruation as a site of patriarchal control and explores how menstrual stigma, taboos, and cultural narratives contribute to the restriction of women's freedom and agency. Focusing on the Tamil web series *Ayali* (2023), the paper analyses how menstruation is represented as a means of controlling women's bodies, education, and aspirations. Through the character of Tamizh Selvi, the narrative challenges inherited socio-religious customs and transforms the female body into a site of resistance. The paper argues that counter-narratives can disrupt silence and shame surrounding menstruation and facilitate awareness, body positivity, identity formation, and the reclamation of female agency.

Keywords: Menstruation; Patriarchy; Menstrual Stigma; Menstrual Taboos; Counter-Narratives; Female Agency; Body Politics; *Ayali*; Gender and Education; Resistance.

Menstruation is a subject which is used as a tool or weapon to control women by men. Patriarchy, through the ages, used this to suppress women and relegate them to a secondary status. Silence and shame are the two things that made women suffer in silence. Religion taboos reinforced this and made it a social stigma. This internalised stigma has been used in social media, where a blue liquid is used to show sanitary napkin advertisements and also as a hygienic crisis, presenting it as a thing to be hidden or to be kept in secret. This has led to social segregation and a lack of awareness among women regarding menstrual hygiene, leading to health issues, especially reproductive infections. Hence, counter-narratives are essential to expose and challenge the patriarchal norms relating to menstruation. Counter narratives help to have an awareness of the body using personal narratives where menstruation is treated as a normal biological process, which shouldn't be viewed as a shameful or stigmatised thing, but changing it into a thing of identity formation. The paper tries to analyse how *Ayali* (2023) challenges the patriarchal dictates regarding menstruation, which have been used to suppress women for centuries.

Women throughout history have been relegated to a secondary position in all spheres of life. Patriarchy is the main source of this relegation. Women have been treated as inferior to

men economically, politically, socially, culturally, and within the family. Though many factors contributed to this secondary status, menstruation remained a major factor. The word menstruation has its origin from the Latin word *mensis*, which means month, which in turn relates to the Greek word *meme*, meaning ‘moon’ and which is related to the English words ‘month’ and ‘moon’. Menstruation is a biological condition where blood and mucosal tissue are discharged from the inner lining of the uterus through the vagina. Since 2010, the word menstruator has been used to “express solidarity with women who do not menstruate, transgender men who do, and intersexual and genderqueer individuals” (Rydström 12). Even though it is a biological process, it is considered ‘impure’ throughout history, and women have internalised this and have been conditioned to this. This ‘impurity’ is passed down from generation to generation and is still prevalent in many sections of society. Menstrual narratives have thus become significant in communicating the myth behind the taboos and in some way instrumental in changing the mindset of people.

The customs and taboos associated with menstruation differ widely in several regions, but the common factor in all regions is that women are impure during this time. Both holiness and impurity are associated with this. The early narratives, especially in the Rig Veda, detail the origins of menstruation thus: Once Indra was cursed with Brahmahatya (killing of Brahman), and to escape from the curse, Indra urged the women to take upon themselves as part of this sin. As a result, they started having their menstrual cycle. In return for women’s generosity in taking his guilt, Indra blessed them with the power of fertility and greater sexual satisfaction. In the epic Mahabharata, during the game of dice and the subsequent disrobing, Draupadi was menstruating, which accounts for her vulnerability. Another instance in the Mahabharata relates to the story of a sage’s daughter who receives a boon from Lord Shiva, where she will be purified through the process of menstruation every month and thus retains her purity.

In certain states, such as Assam, and Kerala, the Ambubachi festival and Thiruputh Arattu are associated with the menstruating Goddess, attracting thousands of devotees. The legends associated with both temples, the Kamakhya temple in Assam and the Chengannur Mahadeva temple in Kerala, are similar.

The deeply ingrained dread of impurity and unholiness and the terror attached to the taboo on menstruating women, is not to be found in the primitive and original form of the concept. There are instances, especially those of the bleeding Goddess, in which

menstrual blood had developed a sanctifying and purifying influence as a manifestation of the life-giving power inherent in the female sex. This explains why in the Tantras menstrual blood has been regarded as so sacred that it is prescribed as an offering to the great God Shiva and his consort Devi. (Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya 11)

The Vedas, epics and some legends treat menstruation as a form of positive energy. But contrary to this, the taboos associated with menstruating women are so ingrained in our society that menstruating women are considered impure even in the 21st century. The origin of this concept of 'impure' can be traced back to the Manusmriti, the ancient law book. This law book, written by the sage Manu, dictates the most appropriate code of conduct for humanity. People blindly followed this and considered it to be the words of God. Manusmriti describes menstruating women as beings who can reduce the strength and vitality of men. "For the wisdom, the energy, the strength, the sight, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with menstrual excretions, utterly perish. If he avoids her, while she is in that condition, his wisdom, energy, strength, sight, and vitality will increase" ("Chapter 4"). The sage describes a menstruating woman as capable of bringing harm to men. If men avoid menstruating women, their strength, wisdom, vitality, etc., will increase. The seclusion has led to the modern isolation of women during menstruation. Manusmrithi's portrayal of menstruating women is demonising while no such demeaning aspects can be seen in the Vedas.

The taboos associated with menstruating women differ in different countries. In India, women are restricted from entering the temples or shrines, the kitchen, cooking, physical activities, touching others or sleeping on a bed. These restrictions are a form of untouchability, as the things that come into contact during the menstrual period are considered unclean. These restrictions have created a sense of embarrassment among the women. Again, older women in the family were more careful in maintaining these taboos, even though they are not aware of the reason behind them. These restrictions became part of all sections of society, some following it in a very rigid manner, especially in the remote areas. Patriarchy thrives through these restrictions as they feel a sense of superiority in all aspects of life, while women are relegated to a secondary status. Menarche marks the beginning of another phase in a woman's life, which is often celebrated in an elaborate way, like a marriage, especially in South India.

The taboos and myths associated with menstruation also account for the lack of proper hygiene among women. Lack of proper awareness and menstrual education can lead to anxiety and fear among girls when they experience periods for the first time.

71% of Indian adolescent girls are completely unaware of menstruation until they experience a real period for the first time. Activists are of the opinion that Indian parents do not thoroughly prepare their daughters for something that they clearly know is bound to happen. And this lack of preparation causes much avoidable anxiety, fear, and worries. (Ujaas)

Moreover, it is found that girls discontinue their education after attaining puberty, and the lack of knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene makes the matter worse. “Approximately 23 million girls drop out of school every year after they begin menstruating, according to a 2014 study. Activists are of the opinion that the primary reasons are a lack of clean toilets in schools and a lack of access to sanitary products” (Ujaas). Adding to this lack of awareness of hygiene during menstruation can have an adverse effect on their health:

When engaging with the MHM literature on India, one is invariably and immediately bombarded with a range of ‘alarming’ statistics that starkly highlight the ‘deficiencies’ in Indian women’s and girls’ menstrual knowledge and practices. These studies report statistics such as 88% of menstruating women in India use fabric, rags, ash, straw or wood shavings to absorb their menstrual flow...and poor menstruation hygiene practices cause a 70% increase in incidence of reproductive tract infections. (McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt 16)

Lack of communication and awareness regarding menstruation made matters worse. Silence is used as a powerful metaphor that communicates menstruation as shameful, impure and dirty. There is a lack of proper mother-daughter communication that leads to inadequate preparation and support among girls. In families, when a girl gets her first period, all the family rejoices in her attainment of puberty, except herself. The girl is not able to understand the situation. From that day onwards, she is asked not to communicate about periods to others, not to touch things during menstruation, not to sleep in bed, to sleep in separate rooms, not to enter the temple or shrine, and not to talk with boys. But the reason for doing so is not explained. Since the girl’s mother has done this as per her mother’s dictate and the grandmother from her mother. But no comprehensible explanation has been given to them regarding this.

This happens in all families. The male members also contribute to this, as this kind of isolation during this time gives them a kind of superiority over women.

Menstrual narratives help us to perceive culturally constructed stories, taboos, myths and personal experiences from a shameful, embarrassing subject to an empowering medicalised discourse. These narratives help us to see how a subject which is considered shameful and often articulated in silence became articulations of pain, body positivity and stigma reduction with the aid of literature, education and social media. Early narratives often present menstruation as dirty and impure, not to be articulated in public. But a change in the perception came with sanitary advertisements and films. Early films such as *Molly Grows Up* (1953), *As Boys Grow* (1957) *Period. End of Sentence* (2018), *Swwampurna* (2018), *Padman* (2018), *Pandora's Box* (2022), *Pinki* (2024), et al. present menstruation in a positive light, making it a subject matter not to be discussed in silence.

The paper tries to analyse the television series *Ayali* (2023), written and directed by Muthukumar, with episodes for ZEE5 as a menstrual narrative. The web series exposes the patriarchal aspects of a specific community in Tamil society and, through this, Indian society in general. Hence, the village presented in the series acts as a microcosm of society, which presents the problems of a macrocosmic society. The microcosmic society presented in the series is Veerappannai village with its five-hundred-year-old customs and traditions. The customs of the village started with the elopement of a couple, which enraged the village deity, and hence the ancestors decided to marry off all the girls when they reached puberty to escape from the wrath of the Goddess Ayali. But even in the 21st century, these age-old customs are used to oppress women. The women are not allowed to continue their education or to pursue their dreams, but to obey the dictates of the family and society. The narrative focuses on how the central character, a fourteen-year-old girl named Tamizh Selvi, defies these age-old customs to pursue her dreams of becoming a doctor. “The series raises its voice against the socio-religious factors that are used by men to oppress women, but you wish the series used the long format to maximise its potential and with a better screenplay” (Chandar).

The first episode, titled ‘Achiever’s Board’, unfolds the traditions in the village that, upon reaching puberty, the education of a girl is discontinued, and she is given training in household chores to make her ready for married life. Men of the village take pride in retaining their honour and in controlling women. The central character, Tamizh Selvi, learns that no student from their school has qualified for the tenth standard. The school teacher inspires

Tamizh Selvi and her friends to become the first students to have their names on the Achiever's Board. In the second episode titled 'The Red Pain', inspired by a medical camp held in the village, Tamizh Selvi dreams of becoming a doctor. But she is aware that upon reaching menarche, she will meet the same fate as other girls in the village. Tamizh Selvi is aware that she will not get the support of her parents, as they are too concerned about the customs and traditions of the village. So, she prays to the Goddess Ayali not to reach her puberty as she has to discontinue her studies. But finally, she reaches puberty, but keeps this a secret.

Tamizh Selvi knows well that men of the village use women's bodies, that is, the biological process of reaching puberty, as a means of control. Selvi uses her body to oppose the very system that tries to control it, thereby defying control. She uses her body as a site of resistance to reach her dreams. While her body changes, she refuses to accept that to limit her dreams. She continues to attend school and dreams beyond the limitations imposed on her. It was not an easy process to conceal it from others. In the episode titled 'Kuruvammal's Challenge', her mother comes to know about this. As a normal village woman who dreams of her only daughter's puberty ceremony, this comes as a shock. But Tamizh Selvi convinces her of her plan, and they together keep this as a secret. In the next episode titled 'Hall Ticket', Tamizh Selvi becomes the first woman to get a hall ticket for the matriculation exam. But she has to go outside the village to write the exam. The village head forbids her from going outside the village to write the exam, citing the customs and traditions of the village. But her father defends her by telling the village head that, as she hasn't attained puberty, the family doesn't defy the rules and regulations.

In the episode 'Three Flowers', Kuruvammal and Tamizh Selvi go to the town school to attend the matriculation exam. Thavasi, Selvi's father, has an accident, and Kuruvammal believes that it is due to the wrath of Ayali and asks Tamizh Selvi to discontinue her studies. But Selvi is not ready to do so and decides to continue her studies. In the episode 'No Boundaries for Bold Women', Tamizh Selvi comes up with a plan to stop the marriage of her friend Kayalvizhi. They both plan to break the age-old custom of the village to stop the marriage. No woman was allowed to enter the sanctorum of Ayali once they reached puberty. But Kayalvizhi hides in the sanctorum of Ayali to escape from the marriage. This comes as a shock to the entire village.

In the episode 'The Revolution', due to Tamizh Sevi's motivation, all women come forward to the temple to defy the customs and traditions. This brings to light that all women

had dreams they had to give up to protect the honour of their families and villages. Tamizh Sevi is so happy that she can continue her studies and achieve her dream of becoming a doctor. But everything goes upside down when their efforts are marred by Sakthivel, son of the village head Thiruppathi. To protect her friend Kayalvizhi, Tamizh Selvi has to disclose the secret that she has reached puberty.

In the final episode, 'Ayali', the marriage between Tamizh Selvi and Sakthivel is arranged. All women come forward to stop the marriage. They all raise their voice against tradition and customs and assert their liberty. Those who stand against them were defeated, and when the series ends, we find the village with every boy and girl going to school and college and having their jobs. Everything happened due to the effort of one woman who confronted the customs and rituals to pursue her dream. From a village where menstruation equals restriction in all walks of life, Tamizh Selvi uses her body to redefine the meaning of menstruation. It is not an end to education or freedom. The power structure in the village depends on the knowledge of when a girl becomes a woman. Control over women begins with the surveillance of their bodies. By denying that knowledge to others, she reclaims her freedom, and by denying the surveillance, she reclaims the agency.

Menstruation and its stigma and taboos have been there for generations. Knowledge is a form of control, and understanding menstruation biologically and socially helps to overcome the label of impure or dirty. When women are properly informed and made aware, especially through education, they can fight against the unnecessary rules imposed on them. But this cannot be done individually because surveillance is a collective thing. Women should stand united to overcome this. Conversations regarding menstruation should be done in families, schools and society, which helps in reducing the stigma associated with it. Cultural narratives like *Ayali* help us to show how belief systems are used to control women's bodies and how they can be challenged. Again, proper awareness through families, schools and social media is better in reducing the taboos associated with it and perceiving it as a normal biological process.

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She Steps into the Light: Post-Blackness, Intersectionality, and Challenging of Cultural Taboos in Amanda Gorman's The Hill We Climb

Kiran Maria Jose & Prof. Dr. Anju K.N.

Abstract

Amanda Gorman is an American poet and activist born in 1998. Her work focuses on issues such as oppression, race, feminism and marginalisation. The Hill We Climb is the poem she read at the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden in Washington DC on 20 January 2021. This paper examines the poem through the lenses of Post-Blackness, Intersectionality and the ways in which it challenges the cultural taboos assigned to her and her race by the white majority over the years. Post-Blackness is a shift from exhaustive blackness to expansive blackness. It is moving beyond the monolithic conceptions of black identity. According to Toure, "it means that one is rooted in but not restricted by blackness" (Toure 16). He says that "to experience the full possibilities of blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African American Culture and also from within it". (Toure 4) This is what Gorman does when she sings 'When day comes we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid' (Gorman 20). Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991). Explicitly rejecting the argument that gender, class and race are separate categories of oppression, Crenshaw proposed that 'the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class' (1991, 1242). She intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse. Here Gorman presents herself as the daughter of a single mother, black woman and a successor of slaves. Thus the poem is a celebration of Post-Blackness, a demonstration of intersectionality of injustices placed on black women and an evoking of the American mind against all differences and divisions, discriminations and taboos direct or indirect, 'to seek, to strive and not to yield'.

Key Words: Post-Blackness, Intersectionality, Cultural Taboos, History

According to Brandy E. Underwood, all the three black female inaugural poets in the American history - Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Alexander, and Amanda Gorman—filled their inaugural poems with an Afrofuturist vision of hope characterized by utopian images of environmental sustainability, racial uplift, global peace, and Black Girl Magic, a term coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 to celebrate the beauty and successes of Black women and

girls despite intersectional power dynamics. The poems discussed are Angelou's *On the Pulse of Morning*, written for President William Jefferson Clinton in 1993; Alexander's *Praise Song for the Day*, written for President Barack Obama in 2009; and Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*, recited at President Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021. Notably, Amanda Gorman is the youngest poet ever to read at a U.S. presidential inauguration. Underwood's analysis explores Gorman's inaugural poem as a celebration of Post-Blackness, a demonstration of intersectionality regarding injustices, and a call to the American mind to begin the long walk toward unity (Underwood 88–105).

Amanda S.C. Gorman, the American poet and activist was born on March 1998 in Los Angeles, California, and was raised by her single mother, Joan Wicks, a 6th grade English teacher in Watts, with her two siblings. She studied Sociology from Harvard University. Gorman was chosen as the first Youth Poet Laureate of United States in 2017. After becoming the inaugural poet in 2021 she has featured in the covers of *Time* magazine and *Vogue*. Gorman is the founder and executive director of 'One Pen One Page', an organization providing free creative writing programmes for undeserved youth. Her important books include *The One for Whom Food is not Enough*, *The Hill We Climb*, *Change Sings: A Children's Anthem* and *Call Us What We Carry*.

The Hill We Climb is a free verse poem in 18 stanzas. The poet's message is shaped by the use of rhyme and rhythm, elements that become just as significant as the content itself. Anaphora, enjambment, and personification are some of the literary devices used in the poem. Gorman's tone in this piece of work is upbeat and high-spirited, but realistic rather than naive; it is also determined, and inclusive.

From the very look of the poet and from the very outset of the poem, we can understand that it is a celebration of Post-Blackness. Toure, the main theorist of Post-Blackness, writes in his book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to be Black Now* that Post-Blackness is a situation in which one is rooted in but not restricted by one's blackness. It is a movement from exhaustive to expansive blackness. It is the end of the reign of a narrow single notion of blackness. One must move beyond the narrow and monolithic conception of black identity. "To experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on blackness from outside the African American Culture and also from within it" (Toure, 4). Toure presents blackness as something that people have to transcend or get beyond (75).

Dr Michael Eric Dyson is one of the 105 “luminaries” he interviews as part of his writing the book. Dr Dyson says “the beautiful diversity of Blackness is the most remarkable feature of a Blackness we continue to try to quarantine” (Toure 5). Baker Jr and Simmons write in their introduction to the book *The Trouble with Postblackness* that Post-Blackness is interested in the ways in which contemporary African Americans understand and enact their blackness and their Americanness (Baker and Simmons 56). This is exactly what Gorman does through her presentation of herself at the inaugural ceremony and her poem. Her yellow coat and fire-red hairband were really conspicuous. It can be considered as her own way to assert her own identity as a black woman and a poet. She also wore a ring with a caged bird as a tribute to Maya Angelou’s novel *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Through her strong words she expresses her quintessential blackness or rather Post-Blackness.

We will not be turned round or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation, become the future.

Our blunders become their burdens. (Gorman 10)

Post-Blackness is indeed a rejection of the burden of representation. Gorman’s generation of African Americans does not intend to burden the next generation with a list of do’s and don’ts for blacks. She writes; “When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and afraid” (Gorman 20)

The poem can also be analysed through the lens of intersectionality. Jennifer Yeboah Donkor Appiah has attempted to evaluate the poem likewise in her Undergraduate Dissertation “Solidarity, the Renewal of the American Dream and an Intersectional Approach to Amanda Gorman’s *The Hill We Climb*, Universidad Zaragoza, Faculty of Arts, 2020-2021”.

Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality is a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool. In the 1989 landmark essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term to address the marginalization of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics. Two years later, in 1991 Crenshaw further elaborated the framework in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” There, she employed intersectionality to highlight the ways in which social

movement organization and advocacy around violence against women elided the vulnerabilities of women of colour, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities.

Intersectionality has now become something of a buzzword in contemporary feminist theory. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), “intersectionality” was intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse. Crenshaw argued that theorists need to take both gender and race on board and show how they interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s experiences. “Intersectionality” provided a short-hand term for a more comprehensive and complex perspective on identity—one which would take into account the ways in which individuals are invariably multiply positioned through differences in gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national belonging and more. When Gorman sings

We, the successors of a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl,
Descended from slaves and raised by a single mother,
Can dream of becoming president,
Only to find herself reciting for one.(Gorman 4)

In these lines, the author uses devices such as the alliteration of the consonant “s” to achieve thematic cohesion and to emphasize the poetic speaker’s identity. The reference in this fragment to both the past and the future implies the challenges that the poet has surmounted to reach her current position, speaking to the country at the stairs of the Capitol Building, and her personal experience in navigating the racial divisions that flood the United States. “In establishing a link with her own past, Gorman differentiates her work from traditional narrative, and rather than forgetting the past and starting anew, she remembers her racial roots”.(Appiah,7)

Here, we find the intersection of various disadvantageous positions as a descendent of slaves, a black woman, and one from a poor background. She directly refers to herself and her multiple identities. She has told to media on other occasions too her intention for run for President ship in 2036.

Before her performance, Gorman told CBS This Morning co-host Anthony Mason: “One of the preparations that I do always whenever I perform is I say a mantra to myself, which is ‘I’m the daughter of black writers. We’re descended from freedom fighters who

broke through chains and changed the world. They call me. And that is the way in which I prepare myself for the duty that needs to get done.”

She has not denied the struggles her race had been going through. She acknowledges them as the result of intersection of the weakness of her race, sex and family background. Yet she is brave enough to dream of a beautiful future.

She sings

That even as we grieved, we grew.

That even as we hurt, we hoped.

That even as we tired, we tried.

That we'll forever we tried together victorious (Gorman 12)

Another aspect of Gorman's Inaugural poem is that she has used it as a tool to challenge the cultural taboos placed on her race and on herself by the white majority. During the week before the inauguration, she told *The Washington Post* book critic Ron Charles, “My hope is that my poem will represent a moment of unity for our country” and “with my words, I'll be able to speak to a new chapter and era for our nation.”

Despite her well-known optimistic approach to the future of the US, Gorman does not miss the chance to criticize American capitalism as a system built on the back of the slave economy (Inikori 169). However, the country's darkest periods are not an obstacle for her positive outlook; in fact, they are the source for her optimism: it is her community, as a descendant of slaves, that has propelled her to this prominent position at the presidential inauguration. Gorman emphasises the idea that African Americans have come a long way in terms of race, and she is proof that their quest for equal rights, which has come close to being achieved, was not in vain. The poetic speaker's references to Black resilience and pride, as well as the deeply rooted racism that the United States is still grappling with, serve as an example of how the country as a whole might learn to address its flaws. Thus, she uses herself as a symbol to convey that America remains a place of opportunity and hope, where the seemingly impossible can become a reality. She discusses the turbulences spanning the colonisation of the Americans, war of Independence, slavery, segregation, the various wars of the twentieth century and the War on Terror. Gorman declares that the ‘dawn is ours’ implying that victory is secured by just forces.

We are striving to forge our union with a purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures, colours, characters
and conditions of man.(Gorman 16)

She also mentions the January 6 storming (2021) of the US Capitol as ‘a force that would shatter our nation, rather than share it’. The poet emphasizes on the need to eschew weapons and work together for a secure future’.

Gorman has used the first person plural noun ‘we’ many times in the poem. To Brandy E Underwood “it privileges collectivity over individuality” (Underwood,102).

The alliteration and rhyme in “the norms and notions of what ‘just is’ / Isn’t always justice” (7-8) alludes to Martin Luther King’s quote “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice” (Burch et al.), which has resonated in the Black Lives Matter protests. Gorman’s line also evokes the movement’s popular slogan “no justice, no peace” (Burch et al). This great awakening made Americans realise, as Gorman puts it, that “quiet isn’t always peace” (6). Therefore, the poet encourages all citizens to find their voice and speak up, because silence does not contribute to justice nor peace. Through the perceptible wordplay of “just is” and “justice”, the poetic speaker implies that, while both concepts are similar, they have entirely separate meanings. That is, just because something is within the law does not make it right, in the same way that the conventions and conceptions of their predecessors that were considered fair, cannot be applied to nowadays multicultural America. This might suggest that the U.S. requires a new start by establishing new norms and notions of justice that are appropriate to the newly reborn America of the 21st century. In other words, in the contrast between what is fair and what is legal, Gorman makes clear her refusal to accept society as it is and instead her will to improve it.

Thus when she says “We will not march back to what was/We will move to what shall be” her message is clear; she as the representative of the young generation of America wants to re write the history of the country defying all cultural and racial taboos.

Conclusion

Hence, the inaugural poem of Amanda Gorman *The Hill We Climb* demonstrates the traits of Post-Blackness, which is a neo and diverse expression of blackness, a declaration that the narrow single notion of blackness has died; an acknowledgement of the trials she had

been through as a woman of colour and a daughter of a single mother which signals intersectionality, and a clarion call to challenge and fight against all the historical atrocities against her race and sex down the years. Thus she firmly affirms that there is no going back to the past discriminations or the present indirect racism. The only road before her is the one ahead that leads to democracy, unity, hope and equality.

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