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The Principal,  
Providence Women's College,  
Kozhikode-673009

**ISSN 2319 - 4189**

DECEMBER 2017

VOLUME 8

ISSN 2319 - 4189

# DIOTIMA'S

## A JOURNAL OF NEW READINGS



**The Body: History Representation Resistance**

**Peer Reviewed Journal**

*Published by*

THE POSTGRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
PROVIDENCE WOMEN'S COLLEGE  
KOZHIKODE – 673 009  
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## INTRODUCTION

### The 'Somatic Turn' in Humanities and Social Sciences

Kavya Krishna K.R.

From the last two decades of the twentieth century onwards the body has become a key site enhancing our understanding of society and culture. A renewed focus on 'embodiment' began to give fresh insights to socio-cultural analysis. It is described as the 'turn to the body'/'somatic turn' within humanities and social sciences and it culminated in the emergence of the interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary field of 'body studies' and/ 'body culture studies'. For many interdisciplinary researches, the body has become a central question for political, social and cultural intervention in relation to gender, caste, religion, disability, medicine, labour, old age, performance/dance, film, technology, architecture, ethics etc. to name a few. The classical positivist sociological assumption that the body as an object of study belongs primarily to biology has collapsed and it has begun to be analyzed from socio-cultural perspective.

#### Theoretical Background

The theoretical backgrounds for the 'rise of the body' in academic inquiry are diverse. The lone gone theoretical ancestry of the body question can be traced back to the critique of/rejection of Cartesian Dualism (body-mind dualism) by Nietzsche and many other notable western philosophers. Yet, it is the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s in Europe and America which placed embodiment as a central issue for intellectual inquiry through their argument that questions related to women's body are not 'private' but something of larger 'public'/political concern. The feminist focus on domestic violence, reproduction issues, health and pornography placed the gendered body on the centre stage. For different schools of Post-Structural Feminism, Queer Studies or to use the umbrella term- Gender Studies, the body is central to their scholarship. The works of German sociologist Norbert Elias *The Civilizing Process* Vol.I: *The History of Manners* (1969) and *The Civilizing Process* Vol.II: *State Formation and Civilization* (1982) (originally published in German in 1939) and Pierre Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus' has influenced the field. Michel Foucault's works especially *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and to certain extent *History of Sexuality* (1976-79) are the major influences on body studies. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) traces

the change in European penal system historically and makes clear how the governmental power structures operate different forms of 'biopower' which imprint themselves on, through and within bodies of the citizen subjects. Foucault's compelling and often disturbing opening passage of *Discipline and Punish* (1975) gives a detailed description of how the monarchies governed the subjects by carrying out spectacular public display of dreadful destruction of the body of offenders as a show of and warning about the destructive power of the sovereign. From there, within a few decades emerged a new penal system, which focused not on destruction of the body but on 'disciplining the body and the soul' of the citizen subject. The new governmental system see the population as human capital and aims to improve their quality using disciplinary institutions like army, schools, hospitals, prisons etc. Using Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon; a central watch tower in a prison from where the warden can monitor every action of the prisoners, Foucault develops the theory of Panopticism as a symbol of disciplinary society of surveillance. The awareness of the Panopticon eye/continuous surveillance of the law and order system encourages the subjects to be reflexive about their behavior, improve themselves and become productive citizens of the country. For Foucault the body is shaped by 'a great many different regimes or power structures'. It is an after effect of the play of power and "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1978:39). Foucault's works demonstrated the importance of the question of 'the body' to understand social structures, construction and maintenance of social inequalities, human agency, and in forging of social solidarities

#### A Brief Survey of the Field of Body Studies

Let us examine some of the areas on which body studies currently flourish. The centrality of the 'the body' in Gender Studies is already mentioned. Biomedical discourse with its focus on biomedicine and medicalised bodies looks at, "the ways in which, medicine is transforming its conception of the body from a passive receptacle of disease to a responsible and active agent of self care" (Hancock 6). Commodification of medical field has resulted in academic scholarship where medicine and body studies intersect. Studies on organ transplant trafficking, biotechnological exploitation of DNA, 'life cell' preservation, surrogate pregnancy, sperm banking etc are examples of the same. Disability Movement and Disability Studies and studies on old age/gerontology have developed as independent areas of research in relation to

the body. New researches on disability free itself from medicalisation and the resultant exclusion from mainstream and seek an embodied view of disability and try to develop a "social model or sociology of impairment" (7). Studies on old age has looked at issues like the increase in aging population due to improvised health care, stigmatization of old age, the economic 'burden' the welfare policies for the old people creates to the government as a non-income generating group, consumer markets valorization of youthfulness and emergence of products like anti-ageing and anti wrinkle creams etc. All these studies tried to do a cultural problematisation of old age.

From twentieth century onwards the body is seen as a raw material with malleability; open to be designed according to the desire of its owner (3). "The body has become a plastic, a life style accessory, a thing to be sculpted, shaped and stylized" (Featherstone 1991 in *ibid* 3). There is an increase in number of features on exercise, dieting, yoga, body work out techniques etc in life style magazines and simultaneously there is booming of gyms, weight loss fitness centers, dance work out classes etc. Tattooing has become a service available in almost all beauty salons. Popularity of plastic surgery or cosmetic surgery is in the rise. Studies which look at the cultural significance of these embodied practices try to see how the 'body work' has become not just a question of maintenance and well being but an issue of life style and identity. Some studies call this obsession with body and appearance the 'narcissism of contemporary culture' and some as the 'aesthetisation of everyday life' (Hancock 3).

Theoreticians like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) have pointed out the relation between consumption, body and identity. Consumer choices are inscribed on the body and it marks class differences and sends non-verbal messages about our identity and distinction from other members in the society. Studies on fashion and self fashioning also intersect with issues of consumer bodies and identity formation.

The idea of human body as 'working body' has initiated many studies related to slave bodies, mechanisms for efficient and maximum utilization of labourers body by capitalist and corporate industries and managing gender difference at work.. Dance Studies and Performance Studies is another discipline which has studied the body in relation to cultural theory. Scholarly Studies on sports and gender also addresses the question of body. Film Studies too addresses the question of body in relation to representation, aesthetics, genre etc. The debates over robotics, embodied artificial intelligence and

creation of interactive robots for warfare and as sex dolls create debates about the borders between human and non-human bodies (Shilling 9)

The body of the citizen is always controlled by governmental regimes. In India the mass sterilization camps which were conducted during the period of Indira Gandhi was a mechanism of controlling the body of the citizen's and thereby the population. Further with the coming in of 'bodily governance' our body as finger print, voice recognition etc has become our identity card and 'password' in the form of biometric data (10). The controversies over the biometric data of citizen's collected in the form of Aadhaar data is an issue related to bodily governance.

In historical and contemporary Kerala/India the body was always the locus of forming, negotiating and resisting caste, religious, class and gender identities. The body and dress as an extension of body was and is used to maintain caste/religious and gender demarcations/distinctions in society. Even the sight of the lower caste body was considered as polluting by the upper castes in Kerala until early twentieth century. The menstruating female body still continues to be believed as polluting. The story of Nangeli, an Ezhava woman from the early nineteenth century Travancore who chopped off her breast as protest against the inhuman breast tax is an instance of embodied protest by women. It points out the historical mechanisms of governing and surveillance of the lower caste female bodies by authorities. Contemporary controversies like the moral policing and attack on transgender people, or on young boys/men who grow their hair are issues where the question of the body, gender and sexuality intersect. The hormone test to determine the gender of female athletes and the court case regarding the gender of athlete Pinki Pramanick has at its centre the question of body and the fluidity of sexual identity. The case in Rajasthan High Court and Supreme Court regarding the Jain ritual Santhara - fasting unto death and whether it should be considered as suicide and thus a criminal act or as provision under constitutional right to practice one's religion is also an area where the question of body, religion and law intersect. These are just few historical/contemporary instances where one can see the centrality of the question of the body and can thus open up new avenues of research.

The last two sections tried to give a glimpse of the theoretical background and current researches in the area of body studies to situate the current volume of *Diotima's* on 'The Body, History and Representation' within the field and also to invoke the interest of students/scholars who may wish to

work in the area. Both the sections are just pointers/indicators on the field of body studies and it is neither comprehensive nor conclusive.

### The Articles in the Volume

The volume begins with an article by Navaneetha Mokkal where she brings together the well known Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's diary and her paintings in order to understand how it produces an aesthetics of disability which challenges the entrenched connections between beauty, wholeness and art through poetic and graphic representations of the experiences of the body. The second article by Shilpa Anand also deals with the question of disability and body; it traces the emplotment and discourse of one-eyed figures in literary and media presentations and the role that prosthetics play in concealing and revealing disability. She uses two narratives: one is the media representations of the story of the yesteryear cricket star Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi and the other is the character of Vellu Pappan in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Samata Biswas's article looks at the Bengali Women's magazine *Sananda* and the special features on ageing it brought out between 2012 and 2014 and try to read how the magazine actively participates in the creation of ageing and simultaneously create active consumer subjects. Classical Indian Dances requires the dancer's body to be disciplined within hegemonic boundaries. In the practice-led research paper; Nirmala Sheshadri- a diasporic Indian dancer and researcher in the field of Dance Studies, proposes a category of dancer who resists the disciplinarity of Bharatanatyam to express her lived feminine experience as 'the Problematic Danseuse'. Saradindu Bhattacharya examines Art Spiegelman's Holocaust graphic memoir *Maus* as a case study for the representation of trauma through the body of the victim/survivor. Sruthi B Gupta's paper uses Sadat Hasan Manto's short stories/partition literature and contemporary performative bodily politics in Kashmir by women to read how women's bodies have become sites of violence, politics and resistance. Sangeetha Damodaran's paper focuses on the omission of any narrative on menstrual body in travelogues written by women. Ritika Pathania explores how soldier's body produces affective economies by visualizing the war dead at Kargil War Memorial. Jayasurya Rajan's paper looks at the representation of the dalit body in the writings of the Dalit poet and activist Poykayil Appachan (1878-1939). She brings forth how Appachan presented the lived experience of the dalit body as a slave body in his poems; a fact often unrepresented in written historiographies. The last paper in the volume by Divya Shah looks at Adil Jussawalla's poetry collection *Missing Person* to read the discursive

construction of the body of the Bombay city in the context of city's relationship to urban men who is an outsider or exile or migrant to the city.

The articles in this volume could cover only few areas which intersect with the question of body like- disability, ageing, dance, trauma, sexual violence, performative body travel and female body, the dalit body, nation/war/soldier and body and the cityscape as body. Yet, hopefully this volume of *Diotima's* may open up/ lead to further research in the area of the body, culture and society.

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## 'I am Disintegration': A Reading of Frida Kahlo's Diary

Navaneetha Mokkal

### Abstract

This paper is a reading of the noted Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's diary in conjunction with some of her paintings in order to analyze how it puts forward an aesthetics of disability. The illustrated journal *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* covers the time period from 1944-54. Kahlo's multi-colored diary with scribbles, jottings, sketches and poetry is a dense assemblage of words and images that offers a moving testimony about the interlinkages between art, subjectivity and the body. I analyze how Kahlo's poetic jottings and her sketches that can be placed along with her painting that graphically depicts the experiences of the body in order to challenge the entrenched connections between beauty, wholeness and art.



Figure 1: I am Disintegration

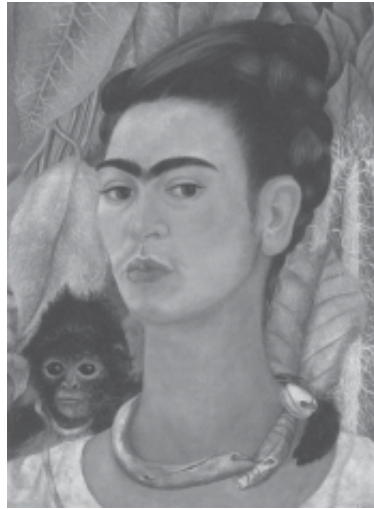
"I am disintegration," scribbles the well-known artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) in her diary as a note to her painting of a woman's body on a pedestal literally falling apart, floating head, feet, hands—one eye suspended in mid air (Kahlo 1995: 225 see fig. 1). In this paper I propose to do a reading of Frida Kahlo's diary in conjunction with some of her paintings and analyze how it puts forward an aesthetics of disability<sup>ii</sup>. The illustrated journal *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* covers the time period from 1944-54 and it was translated from Spanish and published in English in 1995 with an introduction by Carlos Fuentes and commentary by Sarah M Lowe. This is a bi-lingual and multi-layered text that reproduces scribbles, sketches, notes, letters, and jottings by Frida Kahlo in her diary. This paper is a preliminary exploration of this illustrated journal to see how Kahlo forges a new aesthetic form that challenges the entrenched connections between beauty and health. Kahlo's multi-colored 'self-portrait' is a dense assemblage of words and images that offers a moving testimony about the interlinkages between art, subjectivity and the body.

Frida Kahlo kept this intimate journal in the last ten years of her life from the mid 1940s when she was thirty-six or thirty-seven and continued writing in it till her death in 1954. In the introductory essay to this diary, Sarah Lowe informs us that by mid 1944, Frida Kahlo had produced about one hundred paintings and she had met with a number of successes in her artistic career. The opening entry of *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* is a small black and white photograph of Kahlo, lying down with her eyes closed, framed by a wreath of blue and yellow flowers, a pink ribbon and a white dove attached to it (202, see fig. 2). This reclining image of Kahlo, frozen frame, eyes closed is very different from the upright Kahlo who meets the viewer's gaze defiantly in most of her self-portraits (see fig. 3). This prelude seems like her attempt to parody her own obituary. It functions

as an ironic comment of the multiple attempts to iconise her and thus in many ways reduce her to a cult figure.



**Figure 2:** Opening Entry of the Diary "Painted 1916"



**Figure 3:** *Self-portrait with Monkey* (1938)

There have been few women artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who have been as iconised as Frida Kahlo. Her photographs are as widely circulated as her paintings, which often take the form of self-portraits. In spite of Kahlo's obvious references to her disability in her work, in much of the popular mythology around her and even in many critical writings about her, her disability is either evaded or it is seen as a symbol of her martyrdom. Her paintings are often viewed as therapeutic, the only way open to her to erase her disability and make herself "whole" again. Even in the circulation of her paintings this erasure of disability is at work. I make this observation on the basis of the various resources I have looked through in the course of my research such as the cover picture of the coffee-table painting collections available in bookshops, the postcards of Frida pictures in museums, and also the paintings put

up in Frida fan club sites on the Internet. In many of the biographical accounts of Kahlo's life her polio attack in her childhood is seen as a disability that she "compensated" for by becoming a fine athlete. "In her black bloomers she played soccer, boxed, skated, and became an excellent swimmer. Her childhood friend Aurora Reyes recalled, 'When she walked, Frida made little jumps so that she seemed to float like a bird in flight'" (Kismaric and Heiferman 1992: 107). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes the ideology of cure that is the predominant framework within which all disability narratives are placed. "This ideology of cure is not isolated in medical texts or charity campaigns but in fact permeates the entire cultural conversation about disability and illness"(2004: 86), she observes. In this discursive frame where disability is papered over and recuperated within a narrative of 'cure' it is not surprising that Kahlo's paintings are read as therapeutic. Kahlo's diaries form an important text for analysis because it disrupts these commonly circulated narratives about her. Far from seeing her art as a way of moving out of the materiality of her body, her diary shows us how her art provided her with a platform to document her experience of illness. Thus the diary becomes an important site to break through the discourse of "Fridomania" within which Kahlo's disability is papered over<sup>iii</sup> or used as another trope to add color to an already sensationalized life story. It presents an interconnected, jumbled up, everyday world within which we can find no Gods, only temporally functioning bodies.

Sarah Lowe provides short commentaries that frame this highly fragmented text and imposes a structural coherence on it. Lowe is often shocked and at times even disgusted by the stark manner in which Kahlo paints her own disabled body. "There is something horrifying about this carefully drawn image and its attention to details"(277), she writes in her commentary to Kahlo's self-portrait – headless with the wide belt and the prosthetic legs clearly visible (277, see fig 4). Lowe does not pause to probe this sense of discomfort that the painting evokes in her



nor does she raise the question about how works like this can “make a contribution to the history of art by assaulting aesthetic dictates that ally beauty to harmonious form, balance, hygiene, fluidity of expression and genius” (Siebers 2003: 186). In my reading of the diary I found some of the contextual information provided by Lowe quite helpful, and I could not have accessed this text without the translation. But in order to uncover the disability aesthetics at work here I often had to read against the grain of Lowe's commentary.



Figure 4: “Support No.1, Support No.2”

Kahlo's diary resists easy reading, both in terms of its form and content. The entries are often not dated and it is marked by its chaotic structure. It is a pastiche of verbal jottings and sketches. If you quickly flip through the pages of her diary what will catch your immediate attention are the boldly colored sketches and paintings—this includes graphic representation of her ulcerated right foot and her spinal column,

which underwent more than thirty operations and led to her deteriorating health. The written texts are highly fragmentary and broken—leaning more towards poetry than prose. The diary also resembles a scrapbook because she often pastes into it postcards or other pictures that contributes to its textured nature and also emphasizes its links to the ephemeral and the everyday.

“I'm not sure if I want all poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another (Ferris 2004: 188), writes Jim Ferris in his account of how his poetic practice is embedded in the experiences of his body. He argues that the body is not just an important image in poetry, but conventionally poetry itself is imagined as a well-wrought body. Traditional poetic forms with its ‘even feet’ and stress on a sense of wholeness, harmony and integrity hinge on an idealized version of the human body. Thus every poem like a ‘well wrought urn’ encapsulates within its own body this mythical idea of the perfectly formed human body. Ferris is clear that his choice of poetic form is a political one. His feet are uneven, his path is irregular and the way he writes reflects the way he walks. By writing poems that deviate from the norm of how a poetic body is supposed to look like, he is questioning the idea of wholeness as being concurrent with beauty and expresses the need for aesthetic forms that engage with the inherent instability of the human body.

The poetic form, which Kahlo embraces in her diary, shows us that the experience of brokenness is not unique to the disabled body, but it is the fact of human life itself. In this sense the disabled body becomes the exemplary body in her writing. She coins an aesthetics in which the love sonnets of Petrarch and the slow decay of gangrene can coexist. Let me demonstrate this by presenting to you some extracts from her diary,

methylene, joke, cancer, laughter.  
 warble – glance – neck, vine  
 hay clamp consumption lively  
 wave – ray – earth - red – I am.  
 [.....]  
 ballad – gangrene – Petrarch  
 sunflower – sinister blues. acute  
 rosemary – circumlocutions – garbage – yesterday  
 lap – tumbling – I draw close  
 visions – illusive – sleeping – pillar.(203)

Single words form a sentence; seemingly opposing ideas are thrown in together, with no connecting threads to make the transition smooth. Her writing calls on a different kind of reading practice, a suspension of our constant desire to string ideas together to form a neat whole. One cannot but notice the repeated mention of disease, decay and death. Words like methylene, cancer, consumption, gangrene, acute, garbage are juxtaposed-with seemingly brighter aspect of life, sunflower, black hair, silk, joke, laughter. What emerges is a collage of images in which each of these ideas seems to bleed into each other. It is no longer possible to see a world in black and white, the sunflower gets tinged by the “sinister blues”, and cancer is sandwiched between joke and laughter. The arrangement of words, their permutations and combinations work to convey a sense of rupture in the normative manner of looking at the world, in which sickness and health are neatly compartmentalized. What we see here is not the aesthetics of harmony but the aesthetics of clutter produced by throwing things together. Colors, flowers, bodily secretions, coming together to unravel the neat separations between beauty and ugliness, growth and decay, “wave – ray – earth - red – I am”(233).

Tobin Siebers discusses the controversial work of avante-garde performance artists like Karen Finley who bring to the public realm of

the stage “a spectacle of errant body fluids” or Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* which presents the paradox of the divine son of God, “defiled by a mortal body and its waste fluids” (Siebers 2003: 186). He argues that the shock value of these performances hinges not so much upon their quibble with certain aesthetic principles, but more so on the fact that they bring to the public eye the materiality of the body and its organic materials. The 1999 exhibition *Sensation* by young British artists at Brooklyn museum, which the mayor Rudolph W Guilani attacked as “sick stuff” was again an outraged response to the organic nature of these art works. “They use real bodies, body parts, and body products as their medium, transforming the museum into a shadow world of the mortuary or hospital and exhibiting without mercy the organic foundation of human life and death” (Siebers 2003: 188).

Frida Kahlo's diary in many ways partakes of the foundational principles of these contemporary art works. She is also “without mercy” as she painstakingly records the disintegration of her own body. Her writing often jolts us into realizing the physicality of bodily experiences, which she presents before us in a stark manner.

Yesterday the seventh of May  
 1953 as I fell  
 on the flagstones  
 I got a needle stuck in  
 my ass (dog's arse)  
 [...] they took  
 an X ray – several  
 and located the needle and  
 they are going to take it out one  
 of these days with a magnet. (284)

The comparison of her “ass” to a “dog's arse” shows her attempt to foreground the organic nature of all bodies which are mutable. In Frida

Kahlo's diary as well as her paintings the experiences of the body are rendered with such detail and in such a forthright fashion that it is not possible to read it as a metaphor. But in spite of Kahlo's stress on the materiality of the body, it is often appropriated into the discourse of the body as symbolizing something else. Examples of this kind of transference of the bodily experience can be found in the editor's comments in the diary itself.

"Who would say that stains/live and help one live? /Ink, blood, odor"(227), Kahlo writes at one point. The editor Lowe describes this as "one of Kahlo's most illuminating statements with respect to her own creativity"(227) and supports her opinion by quoting from Susan Gubar's "The Blank Page and Female Creativity". The connection between ink and blood that Kahlo makes is quickly read as a metaphor for female creativity. But placing it in the context of the whole diary this statement signals towards the material processes of the body, the blood, and the odor which also forms a part of an artist's life. One cannot separate an artist's paint or the writer's ink from bodily smells and secretions, artistic creation does not happen in a disembodied realm. In Kahlo's paintings about her miscarriages *My Birth* (1932) and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) what she presents is what never gets written about the process of reproduction, especially when it is sanitized and collapsed into the rhetoric of creative birthing. The blood, the stain, the odor is all bled out and we get a neat picture of creative production. This is exactly what Kahlo resists by calling our attention to the messiness of the processes of the body. When we look at some of her paintings such as *My Dress Hangs There* (1933), we see how she is constantly drawing our attention to the cultural signs of able-bodiedness. In *My Dress Hangs There* we have Frida Kahlo's costume hanging on a clothesline tied between a toilet bowl and a trophy. This juxtaposition of the trophy and the toilet bowl both placed on pedestals seems to overturn the conventions about what is to be concealed and what is to be exhibited. In the backdrop we

have a cityscape, tall buildings, factories and ships spewing smoke. Her dangling costume in this backdrop suggests that there are certain signs of able bodiedness one has to don in order to function in this culture.



Figure 5: My Dress Hangs There (1933)

In another painting *Memory* Kahlo's body itself becomes a two-dimensional costume that is hanging from the clothesline. Both her hands are detached from her body and they are attached to two of her other costumes that are dangling on the line with her. This slippage between body and clothes is seen in her rough sketch in her diary of a group of women substituted for the clothes on a line, "People? Skirts?" is Kahlo's jotting underneath this (238). These paintings seem to reflect on the process through which every body is encouraged to reproduce the signs of able-bodiedness. Our clothes are not made for us; we remake our bodies to fit the mould of our clothes. Thus Kahlo's attempt is not to posit the "disabled body" in opposition to the able body, but to render visible the contents within the construct of the able body itself.

She comments on the human effort to sustain the illusion of an immutable, able body as a "vain hope", a negation of the organic, transient nature of the body.

life. the great  
 joker. nothing has a name.  
 [...] vain hope of con-  
 structing the cloths. the kings.  
 so silly. my nails. The  
 thread and the hair. The bantering nerve  
 I'm going with myself"(213).

I do not say that I can understand what she means in these lines, I do not think her aim was to make herself decipherable. But the references to the cloth and kings seems suggestive when we read it side by side with her painting, *My Dress Hangs There* for it seems to laugh at the attempts to create an unchanging, ideal body divorced from the organic elements of the nail or the hair.

David Lomas observes how the popular fad around Frida Kahlo has taken the form of an obsession with her exotic persona, but has been largely silent about her imagery. Analyzing the medical iconography in her paintings like *The Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) and *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) he argues that Kahlo draws on the diagrammatic and anatomical representation of the human body within the medical discourse and uses it to coin a new artistic language to speak about the lived experiences of her body:

Only by acknowledging the constructed and mediated nature of visual images can one recognize the constraints Kahlo must contend with; namely the absence of artistic languages or traditions adequate to her lived experience. The recourse to a medical iconography of the body can be understood as her

attempt to create a semantic space where this could be represented (Lomas 1993, 6).

Kahlo exploits the privilege of medicine to expose parts and functions of the body that are often hidden. In the *Henry Ford Hospital* she creates a visual language to represent her miscarriage by using the diagram of the uterus and the fetus as it is drawn in textbooks of obstetrics.



Figure 6: Henry Ford Hospital (1932)

Her appropriation of medical imagery also becomes a means of resisting her subordinate position within the hierarchy of the doctor patient couple and negotiating a degree of autonomy in the field of representation. Lomas observes that her biographer recounts that after the first miscarriage Kahlo begged the staff to provide medical texts illustrating the event but was refused, "the knowledge she sought about her body was illicit, and by playing with medical imagery Kahlo commits a Promethean theft" (Lomas 1993: 18). Kahlo's attempt to subvert the doctor patient hierarchy and to show that the doctor is no superhuman figure is clear in her comments about Dr Juanito Farrill who was one of her doctors with whom she had a long association. She says how Dr Juanito Farrill was "A true man of science" and a heroic being who was saving the life of others when he himself was also ill (251). There seems

to be an ironic undercutting of the heroism of the doctor, by showing that even he is not beyond disease.

The experience of reading the diary is multi-layered because one looks at the medicalized drawings and also the written extracts from her diary. So on the one hand we see the clinical representation of Kahlo's own body, and on the other hand we have her written words describing this extremely difficult period of her life and the thoughts that sustained her through this.

August 1953

It is certain that they are going  
to ampute my right  
leg. Details I don't know much  
but the opinions are very  
reliable.[...]  
I'm very very, worried,  
But at the same time I feel  
It would be a relief.  
In the hope that when  
I walk again  
I'll give what remains of  
my courage  
to Diego<sup>v</sup>.

She actively interjects the disabled subject back into the medical discourse and also records how the medical discourse in turn shapes the experience of illness. This juxtaposition of the objective voice of the medical discourse and subjective voice of the disabled person is quite evident in *The Henry Ford Hospital*. The hospital equipment and anatomical representations of parts of the body are suspended in the air, but they are tied back by the network of the veins to the bleeding body of the woman who stares at us with her eyes wide open. The body

of the woman and what Kenny Fries terms as "the stare"<sup>v</sup> has the power to disturb existing hierarchies of seeing. This is especially so within the medical discourse, where the disabled person is always the one under observation and never seems to have the power to stare back. Kahlo in the painting I mentioned above as well as in her diary stages these practices of 'staring back' by firmly planting the disabled subject within the medical discourse.

Frida Kahlo is often portrayed as a martyred figure on a pedestal, singular in her suffering. Her diary on the other hand works as a site which foregrounds the connectedness of her life with other people and the world in general. Though the diary as a form is often thought of as individualized and private, Kahlo uses this form to show how the individual experience of disability is never a completely individual one. It is shaped by the larger space of the hospital and the interactions of the disabled person with various other people, which includes the doctors, nurses and other caregivers. In the last written passage in her diary she expresses her thanks to her doctors and the various other hospital staff such as the stretcher-bearers, the cleaning women and attendants (285).

Many of these entries are in the form of letters often addressed to her husband Diego Riviera and sometimes, to other important people in her life. Riviera is an overwhelming presence in this diary and many of Kahlo's poems and sketches dwell on her complicated and intimate relationship with him. Often in her sketches in her diary she expresses her solidarity with a larger collective of people. "Motion in Dance" is a sketch in which she conveys a sense of movement and collectivity; the bright strokes of red and green evoke the driving force that impels forward a mass of people. This is clearly linked to the Marxist revolutionary zeal to which Kahlo proclaims her sense of solidarity at various points of her diary. She often frames her bodily struggles, the pain and pleasure she undergoes as part of the revolutionary struggle<sup>vi</sup>.

This seems to be one of the ways in which she forges a more interconnected imagination of her experience of disability, which takes her out of the mould of the isolated martyr. "Always revolutionary, never dead, never useless (251)," she writes at one point.

Moving in and out of the hospital, undergoing multiple surgeries including the amputation of her leg, Kahlo retains her sense of humor and finds space in her diary to laugh at herself at times. There is an interior dialogue between two Fridas engraved on two broken urns, which says "Don't come crying to me!" and "Yes I come crying to you!" (253, see fig 7, 8) and these sketches have an element of jest in them. This might be also due to the cartoon like way in which it is drawn. In an ironic self-portrait her face is cut into fragments by straight black lines, splintered, like a cracked porcelain dish and underneath this she writes, "What a dish!" (253). Under another reproduction of her own face in bright crayon colors she writes, "Who is this idiot?" (244). This seems to gesture towards a certain sense of self-irony, a particular brand of humor that comes from a recognition of the unreliability of one's own body and therefore of life itself.

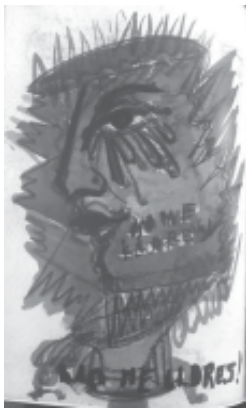


Figure 7: "Don't Come Crying to Me"

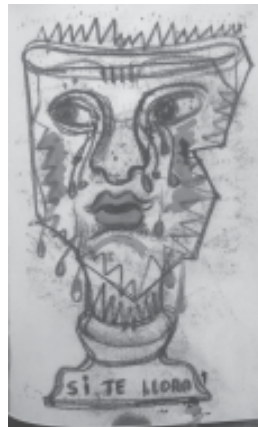


Figure 8: "Yes, I Come Crying to You"

But we live in cultures that are bent on expelling disabled bodies from their conception of the social body as healthy and whole. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out to the relative absence of cultural representations, historically as well as in the present moment, that shows the life of a disabled person in all its complexity (Garland-Thomson 2004: 87). In this context, works like Frida Kahlo's diary which is a document of her "immense joy of living" (257) even as she was chronically ill, raise important questions about who has the power to decide what kind of a life is a creative and meaningful one. Jim Ferris expresses his fear that if he confesses his love for his body, "scars, lumps, limp and all" the reader will at once turn his article into "another inspirational cripple story" (2004: 188). Frida Kahlo's diary does not run such risks, for as she records the journey of her own illness she works using multiple mediums to deconstruct the conception of the able body. As the reader of this diary one is drawn to think about the changing, temporary nature of all human bodies. Her diary shows us how to continue living with the knowledge of imminent death:

madness sickness fear  
part of the sun and of happiness  
electricity and purity love  
nothing is black – really nothing (211).

Reading this diary is a humbling and deeply disturbing experience and what I take away from it is Frida Kahlo's faith in the colors of life. This is no simple inspirational narrative, but it can move one to attain a broader conception of what beauty is and what it means to live in our frail and vulnerable bodies.

**Notes**

- i. One of the most iconic artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Frida Kahlo, was born in Mexico in 1907. She attained international acclaim, especially because of her self-portraits and multiple other paintings that inaugurated a radically new idiom to explore women's embodiment and interiority. In 1913, when she was six years old she contracted poliomyelitis and this infection made her right leg shorter than the left one. In 1925 Kahlo was seriously injured in a streetcar accident, when a handrail bar broke and pierced her from one end of the pelvis to the other. She was also hospitalized several times because of medical complications related to her miscarriage and abortions.
- ii. Disability aesthetics demands a radical reconfiguring of normative notions of beauty and ugliness and makes us see how the impact of one body over another body is culturally produced. It makes possible a "critique of the reliance of cultural and aesthetic ideals on the healthy and able body as well as an appreciation of alternative forms of value and beauty based on disability" (Siebers 2003: 182).
- iii. A most blatant example is Hollywood's tribute to Frida Kahlo, Judy Traymor's film *Frida* (2002) in which her polio infection as a young child is completely obliterated.
- iv. Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was a prominent Mexican painter and established the Mexican Mural Movement. The tempestuous marital relationship between Rivera and Kahlo is also depicted in her diary and her paintings.
- v. "Throughout history, people with disabilities have been stared at. Now, here in this pages – in literature of inventive form, [...] writers

with disabilities affirm our lives by putting the world on notice that we are staring back (1)". This is the beginning of Kenny Fries introduction to *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out*.

- vi. Kahlo painted in a critical phase in Mexican history under the impact of the Mexican Revolution which lasted from 1910 to 1917 and propelled the country into global modernity under the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution. Diego Riviera was one of the main figures in the Mexican Mural Movement, which was produced the government sponsored images of modern, revolutionary Mexico using the visual rubric of socialism and indigenism (Greeley, 216). Kahlo was also firmly embedded in these political movements of her time. Critics like Robin Adele Greeley analyze the complicated interplay between disability, gender and national identity in Kahlo's paintings.

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## Between Being Sighted and Being Sightly: Tracing the Proverbial 'One-Eyed King'

Shilpaa Anand

### Abstract

Proverbs with disability references have become the focus of literary and cultural studies over the past two decades. Linguistic and pragmatic analyses of everyday proverbs, it is believed, would result in a better understanding of a community's conceptualization and attitude towards disabled people, the experience of disability and most significantly the conceptualization of corporeal difference. The well-worn proverb 'in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king', popular in the Hindi-speaking world as '*andhon mein kana raja*' has gained new attention as part of this venture to uncover how we conceptualize disability in everyday spaces. The proverb and the speech-acts that constitute it are used to discredit the person or people the proverb is applied to. Departing from this trend, the present paper is interested in tracing the emplotment and discourse of one-eyed figures in literary and media presentations and the role that prosthetics play in concealing and revealing disability. Two narratives may be of interest as we move towards drafting a representational history: one, the story of the yester-year cricket star and nawab, Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, or 'Tiger' Pataudi and two, the story of Vellya Paapen, a character in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Pataudi's story of losing an eye and gaining a career is a legend of grandeur, told repeatedly, not merely an 'overcoming narrative', but one where his visible disability is made hyper-visible by being plotted narratively

in stories of cricketing heroism and nawab*liness*. The story of Vellya Paapen cannot flaunt his disability the way narratives of Pataudi can but negotiates a complex relationship at the intersections of his caste status and being disabled precisely because of the glass-eye prosthetic he wears.

Proverbs with disability references have become the focus of literary and cultural studies over the past two decades (Devlieger; Kisanji; Kumar). What motivates these research studies is the need to become acquainted with attitudes towards disability in different socio-cultural contexts. Linguistic and pragmatic analyses of everyday proverbs, it is believed, would result in a better understanding of a community's conceptualization and attitude towards disabled people, the experience of disability and most significantly the conceptualization of corporeal difference. The well-worn proverb 'in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king', popular in the Hindi-speaking world as '*andhon mein kana raja*' has gained new attention as part of this venture to uncover how we conceptualize disability in everyday spaces. The proverb is prevalent in different languages including a Latin rendition that may be translated as 'in the street of the blind, the one-eyed man is called the guiding light'. The proverb conveys the idea that an imperfect person is only appreciated among those who are worse off than him (Kumar 159). The proverb's use also connotes an equation between being blind and being foolish or intellectually inferior, where blind serves as a metaphor – the lesser fool is recognized as a leader by those who lack any intellectual ability. The proverb and the speech-acts that constitute it are used to discredit the person or people the proverb is applied to. Socio-linguistic analysis of such proverbs has enabled researchers to speculate on and critique socio-cultural conceptualizations of being blind and being one-eyed. Departing from this trend, the present paper is interested in tracing the emplotment and discourse of one-eyed figures in literary and media presentations and the role that prosthetics play in concealing and revealing disability.

Prosthetic devices serve to restore the loss of body parts and body functions. But if we depart from this clinical understanding of prosthesis we may begin to approach a more nuanced understanding of the values that prosthetic devices carry in terms of the socio-emotional status of the wearer as well as the viewer. Prosthetic devices such as artificial limbs are known to compose or repair the social stigma experienced by the disabled individual while also restoring partial or complete functionality of the affected body parts. If much of the disablement faced by an individual with a visible disability such as the loss of a leg or arm is in the way they are differentially treated or not accommodated in a social environment, then the presence of a prosthetic limb, it is expected, enables them to access the social space in a more equal manner; in that the language of 'lack' now becomes non-applicable. Facial disfigurement of those who are affected by leprosy, loss of facial parts due to accidents or violently acquired injuries are known to result in social ostracism because of visual nature of the disability or what is called disability visibility (Kleege) that at times cannot or can only partially be repaired by cosmetic-prosthetics. Visibility refers to "cultural practices and values" related to vision (Kleege 510) and is distinct from vision which refers to the biological functions related to the eye. Cultural practices related to disabled bodies may be considered as a play between "the desire to see disability framed in culturally appropriate ways and to banish unsightly versions of disability from view" (510-511). The present post-RPD Act moment in India makes it an important time for us to reflect on legal and administrative conceptualizations of disability because acid-attack victims, for the first time, have been included as a category of disabled persons (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act). The stigma experienced by persons affected by acid attacks is in terms of disgust or fear due to what may be classified as 'unsightliness'. Affective responses such as disgust and fear<sup>i</sup> constitute a significant component of the disablement experienced. It is against this backdrop that the present paper examines

discourses of affect in relation to the use of ocular prosthetics where prostheses such as lenses and artificial eyes are worn to correct not so much the sight of the affected person but the ocular effect of the surrounding viewers or onlookers. Ocular prosthetics have a long history of functioning more effectively as objects that have symbolic value rather than as technological objects that have medical value (Ott; Handley). It is argued that ocular prosthetics perform complex functions of social value depending on the specific contexts they are adopted in.

How would we trace the modern representational history of ocular prosthetics in the Indian context? To begin with, the case of the ocular prosthetic, is an interesting one. It is a prosthetic that seems to serve the purpose of composing or restoring the gaze of the viewer to a greater degree, than serve as a prosthetic that restores sightedness to the one who has lost vision in their eye. It could be argued that though the prosthetic is attached to or worn by the disabled individual it in fact assists the gaze of the viewers. The prosthetic repairs what the viewer sees rather than the vision of the eye-less one.

Two narratives may be of interest as we move towards drafting a representational history: one, the story of the yester-year cricket star and nawab, Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, or 'Tiger' Pataudi and two, the story of Vellya Paapen, a character in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. The two cases are compelling because of how they are distinct from each other. Pataudi's story of losing an eye and gaining a career is a legend of grandeur, told repeatedly, not merely an 'overcoming narrative'<sup>ii</sup>, but one where his visible disability is made hyper-visible by being plotted narratively in stories of cricketing heroism and nawab<sup>li</sup>ness. The story of Vellya Paapen cannot flaunt his disability the way narratives of Pataudi can but negotiates a complex relationship at the intersections of his caste status and being disabled precisely because of the glass-eye prosthetic he wears.

Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi's story is not unfamiliar though it may have faded slightly in popular memory. 'Tiger' Pataudi, as he was better known, lost most of the sight in his right eye during a car accident when he was studying in Oxford in 1961 when he was about 20 years old. A shard of glass from the windscreen ruptured his eye and it took surgery and a period of recovery for him to begin playing cricket again. The injury he sustained made him see double images and it was with some effort that Pataudi learnt to pick the closer or 'inner' image to be able to face bowling on the cricket field ("Nawab"). In one of the first matches he played after four months of absence from the game, following the accident, Pataudi wore a contact lens in the eye that was about 90% sightless. Finding that he was troubled by the double image of the ball, he removed the lens half-way through his innings and played on to score 70 runs by keeping one eye closed. In subsequent matches he found he could play better by pulling the cap over his right eye to prevent himself from seeing the double image. Rarely does one find any mention of his use of an ocular prosthetic though it did circulate as an urban legend during the '60s and after that Pataudi wore a glass eye to conceal his damaged one. A stray story on the internet documents how the prosthetic he wore made it "obvious" that he was wearing a prosthetic, thus betraying the sentiment that ocular prosthetics are usually worn to restore the visuality of wearer (Raghavan, "Ocular Prosthesis").

Obituaries and news features that appeared in 2011 document his loss of sight as a 'challenge', a 'tragedy' and so on. The reports also wonder at how much more successful or 'great' he might have been had he not lost sight in one eye (Bal, "Nawab of Pataudi"; "Nawab"). The Pataudi narratives are also replete with metaphors of vision such as, "Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, who overcame an impaired eye to become a visionary" ("Mansur Ali Khan") and never fail to carry a headline that invoke on pun on his one-eyed status. It is this over-emphasis on his disability that makes it hyper-visible; the visuality of his impairment is

never screened off but the disablement is neutralized, even made invisible. In Pataudi's case, the narratives of his disability faithfully adhere to the theory of narrative prosthesis, a situation where disability is explained, justified or made invisible by the narrative that describes and documents it. Descriptions of his disability, how he acquired an impairment and how he 'overcame' his disability are forwarded to correct, repair and prostheticize his disability (Mitchell and Snyder 53). While David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder propose this idea to characterize fictional narratives of disability, in our case, it holds as true for the news reports of Pataudi's one-eyedness. The "explanatory compensation" (53) of these narratives resolves the disability of his sightlessness and follows the narrative routine outlined below:

... first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to the reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of the concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner. (53)

It could be argued that the Pataudi narratives skip the first and second stages and often begin with the third, where his loss of sight in one eye appears at the forefront of the story and then proceeds to the fourth where his charismatic personality and gamesmanship rehabilitate his sightlessness. His disability, in fact, narratively serves to prop his heroism; narratives of Pataudi appear to fit the category of 'supercrip' because of the way in which his cricketing achievements are foregrounded to erase his disability experience. A stereotype of disability representation in mainstream media, supercrip narratives are identified by disability studies discourse as worthy of criticism because of the potential it carries to damage social engagement with disability.

The paradoxes that play out in due course of narrating his disability heroism are worth underscoring. One, that his disability gained an almost commendable visuality because of his other social imbrications and affinities. His royal lineage, his Oxford education, that he was the son of another famous cricketer, that he married Sharmila Tagore and that he had the resources to access medical treatment that restored most of his sight in 1961. Two, his sightliness, the fact that he was “dapper” occluded the perception of his one-eyedness as unsightly. Biographical entries and news features, on Pataudi, on the internet, unfailingly document his good looks even as they describe his impairment. A third paradox consists in Pataudi's use of the one-eyed king proverb in his autobiography, “In the country of the blind, it had been said, the one-eyed man is king. But in the keen-eyed world of cricket a fellow with just one good eye-and-a-bit has to settle for something less than the perfection he once sought” (Pataudi, “Tiger's Tale”).

In Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Velutha's father Vellya Paapen, a Paravan, a lower caste man, loses an eye because of an accident in which a stone chip punctures it. Mammachi, the upper caste woman, pays for a glass eye to be fitted and it is expected that Vellya Paapen will pay off his debt by working for her family. It is expected that, not just him, but both his sons will also work for Mammachi's family to pay off the debt. The episode with Vellya Paapen's glass-eye enables us to reflect on the value an ocular prosthetic assumes depending on the socio-cultural context it is enveloped in. Ocular prosthetics while acting as cosmetic-prosthetics have also served as protective covers that prevent the already injured part from further damage. The prosthetic, in his case, was probably necessary to hide the fact that he had lost an eye; it is not fixing his sight but his sightliness in the eyes of others, it is perhaps functioning as a cosmetic-prosthesis of dignity. While sightliness, an aesthetic quality, may lend the required dignity to a

Paravan it is also likely that as a Paravan, an ‘untouchable’, Vellya Paapen cannot afford to be disabled. It was likely that the disgust he may have attracted by being a lower caste man would have been compounded by the unsightliness of his disability. Vellya Paapen's lower caste status necessitates that his disability be hidden and that he may ‘pass’ for being able-bodied. One of the prominent reasons for wearing a prosthetic is to complete the illusion of having a ‘perfect’ or near perfect face and body. To fulfil his social role as a lower-caste person, Vellya Paapen needs the prosthetic.

Within the world of the novel, the caste social order and caste relations thereof are pretentiously screened over by the gossamer of modern banking exchange rhetoric and practice. Vellya Paapen's lower caste status is now transacted in terms of “mortgaged body parts” (Roy 256) as his relationship with Mammachi assumes the garb of a mortgagor-mortgagee. When Vellya Paapen is overcome by the horror of his son, Velutha's audacity to have romantic relations with Mammachi's daughter, Ammu, he comes to return the glass-eye knowing full well that he would never be able to repay his loan. Velutha's transgressive act, his defiance of caste relations had resulted in the caste-as-banking transaction being nullified, the property had to be returned to the Mammachi bank.

In the episode where Vellya Paapen comes to return his glass-eye to Mammachi, untouchability exposes itself from behind the banking curtain. Mammachi, being blind, does not know what Vellya Paapen is offering her with his outstretched hand. Kochu Maria, Mammachi's human assistive device, tells her that it is his eye. Mammachi who had touched the eye by then “recoiled from its slippery hardness” (255), the narrative tells us. Following this, she “groped her way to the sink, and soaped away the sodden Paravan's eye-juices. She smelled her hands when she'd finished” (255). In what follows, Vellya Paapen puts the eye

back in his socket and tells her that he had been witness to his son and her daughter's romantic entanglement for a while. Enraged, Mammachi pushes him to the ground.

While this episode draws away the screen of banking metaphors and restores the characters and the reader's conceptualization of them to unreconstructed caste relations, it also presents us with a moment of resistance. It is in this act of moment that Vellya Paapen's disability and his prosthetic are mobilized into action as tools of retribution. His artificial eye, dripping with eye-juices, becomes for him, even if unwittingly, a prosthetic of caste vengeance. In forcing Mammachi to hold his prosthetic eye, even if momentarily, Mammachi is forced to touch that which she would never otherwise touch, his eye fluids. Her blindness deters her from knowing what it is that she is being made to hold. Her disability does not facilitate her practice of untouchability and, in turn, carries a new value for the untouchable man. In the world of the blind, the one-eyed man is king!

A prosthetic that is used to conceal the unsightliness of being eye-less participates in a non-visual experience when it is apprehended by way of the other senses. The paradox here centres on the prosthetic and not on the disability, as in the case of the Pataudi narratives. The visuality of the artificial eye is replaced by a sharpening of Mammachi's other senses. It is the tactile knowledge of the slippery-hardness of the artificial eye that makes her recoil, it is the smell of soap in her hands that tells her that she has overcome her transgression of touching a Paravan. The disgust that Mammachi feels has little to do with his disability or his prosthetic eye, both of which she cannot see, but the knowledge of him being lower-caste.

We are left then with two renditions of the proverbial one-eyed king that offer us a complex of disability paradoxes and prosthetic values. In Pataudi's case, his disability is hyper-visible because of the value it

brings to his heroism; the narratives of disability though make invisible the disablement he may have experienced by losing sight in one eye. In Vellya Paapen's case, the artificial eye that he wears to conceal his disability serves him momentarily in neutralizing his lower caste status and in rising above the blind Mammachi. Disabilities and prosthetics, it could be argued, also gain and lose value, values that are socially accrued contextually and perform interchangeable roles in the meaning that they make discursively. Pataudi's disability narratives perform the role of prosthesis better than a lens or an artificial eye ever did to him, in the way that they enhance his cultural value. Vellya Paapen's prosthetic, in the moment that he offers to return it to Mammachi, fulfils a disabling function by carrying negative value as a mortgaged body part and all the weight of his caste status. And it is this caste-value that his prosthetic acquires which enables him to protest the untouchability meted out to him at the hands of the upper caste but blind Mammachi.

### Notes

- i. For a detailed discussion of affective responses to disability constituted by disgust, pity and fear, Bill Hughes's chapter 'Fear, Pity and Disgust: Emotions and the Non-Disabled Imaginary' in the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* edited by Nick Watson et al (2012) may be consulted.
- ii. The 'overcoming narrative', in disability studies discourse, is the critical categorizing of a trope of fictional or non-fictional narratives that foreground or celebrate the progress of a disabled character's victories over their impairment or despite their impairment. Such narratives reinforce the idea that to live with a disability, one must neutralize their impairment and the experience of disablement; such narratives result in the figure of the 'supercrip', an overachiever.

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## “Each Age has its Own Dharma”: Advices to the Aging Body in *Sananda*

Samata Biswas

### Abstract

Between 2012 and 2014, the popular Bengali women's magazine *Sananda* brought out three cover features (one each year), on ageing. They comprised advice for emotional well-being, information regarding diet, fitness and how best to take care of an ageing body. Under late capitalism, Mike Featherstone argues, machine is a powerful metaphor for the body. Increasingly, maintenance (of optimal bodily functions, of a youthful appearance, etc.) like that of a machine becomes a legitimate concern for the 'management' of the ageing body, bringing its appetites, desires and dissatisfactions under control, supervised upon by experts. This paper situates *Sananda*'s concern with the ageing body within contemporary explosion(s) in body cultures, whereby the body is at the same time the site of the operation of bio power, and produced as a function of consumerism. By meting out expert advice to its target readers, and preaching the correct bodily conduct appropriate to each 'age', *Sananda* participates actively in the creation of ageing, albeit active consuming subjects.

Successful management of aging (both in terms of managing the aging body—in keeping with the global impetus on management of bodies, and of populations; as well as of self and cultural perceptions about aging) has seen a dramatic upsurge world-over in recent year. However, in speaking about age studies in the West, the introduction to

Featherstone and Wernick's edited volume *Images of Aging: Cultural representations of Later Life*, holds, while age research has moved towards gerontology and generation of data regarding the aging body, till this volume, not much serious critical attention was directed at the images of aging, although they be profuse in popular culture. In the Indian context, despite the rise in the interdisciplinary field of body studies internationally, the body, and especially representations of the body has received scant attention. The present paper is an attempt to address both these lacunae. Through the analysis of aging advice present in the Bengali women's magazine *Sananda*, I enquire into the politics of 'positive aging', the contemporary imperative towards 'maintenance' of the body and the construction of aging women (as the target readers of *Sananda*) as no longer desiring subjects. This article is divided in two parts. The first part introduces *Sananda* in terms of its content, readership and genre; and the second part looks specifically at bodily aging advice given to women (nearing their forties), to enquire into the representations of the (gendered) aging body, its meanings and the necessity for its management.

I

*Sananda* is the longest running Bengali women's magazine in post colonial India, published by the Anandabazar Group (a leading publication house with several newspapers, journals, television channels and numerous books in its kitty). It was launched in 1986, with the eminent film actor and director, Aparna Sen as its first editor (she continued as the editor till 2005, and Madhumita Chattopadhyay has been its editor since). In trying to define what kind of readership *Sananda* catered to and therefore, what content it deemed to be suitable for such a readership, Sen had the following to say:

That is, a person who has the capacity to control her own life as far as possible given the uncertain nature of the present

world...What kind of a world does a complete woman...inhabit? Certainly it is varied...An aware, intelligent, thinking person's world naturally includes literature, culture, politics, economics, cooking, child-care, housework, science, social work...There must be a place for beauty care and adornment too, surely. Any complete woman necessarily relishes her identity as a *meye*. (*Sananda*, 31 July, 1986: quoted in Chanda 1991: WS 69)

While *Sananda* no longer carries an editorial statement, a 2013 advertisement on the occasion of the completion of 28 years (of *Sananda*), seeks to define the *Sananda* woman. Her life is a combination of sales meetings, shopping, child's home-task, long drive, gym, diet, late night, cooking, facebook, birthday party, interior, hair spa, dining out, office party etc. Three things are of note here: one, even though the magazine is published in Bengali, and the advertisement is also in the Bengali script, most of the words describing the important events and actions in her life are English words, transcribed in Bengali. With the exception of cooking, for which the Bengali form *rannabanna* is used, and decorating the bridal trousseau or *tattva sajano*; the other words either do not have exact Bengali correlatives (e.g. hair spa) or the correlatives are not used. Second: words like 'literature, culture, politics, economics...science, social work', words that signified the concerns that Aparna Sen thought to be part of the complete woman's world<sup>ii</sup> no longer feature in the 2013 advertisement. The present descriptive words and phrases can all be bracketed under the blanket term 'lifestyle'- a publishing industry term that takes into account certain and specific consumption patterns (Ballaster 11). Third, the new words, such as 'gym, hair spa, diet' etc., currently constitute the bulk of *Sananda* articles, and signal an increased engagement with the body. Current issues of the magazine, such as the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2017 issue, with 'The Recipe to become Thin' (*roga howar recipe*) as its cover feature has three articles directed at losing weight (these are special features), apart

from the regular columns dealing with diet, workout, '*paricharja*' (here standing for skin care), beauty, makeup, and wellbeing (in this instance, the resolution to lose weight, delivered by bariatric surgeon)- indicate the trend. It is also important to keep in mind that a 2006 interview posits the ideal reader as a person capable of reading Bengali, between 25 and 45 years of age (Sinha n.pag.). The content shows her to be predominantly Hindu, middle class and salaried. Although several studies of magazines have shown that a magazine is a shared resource among many different kinds of readers, the content however is generated keeping a specific kind of reader in mind.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>iii</sup> that *Sananda* and in fact, the whole lot of magazines designated as women's, have, as a central concern, the education of women. Raymond Williams writes: 'Who can doubt...reading the women's magazines, that here, centrally, is teaching' (Quoted in Weiner 131). Since the early eighteenth century periodical essays in England, by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, that sought to teach the 'fairer sex' what to read and to wear (as also witnessed in nineteenth century England and colonial India), each 'new' condition of being, of means of production and of women's position in society was seen to have merited new forms of education for women, be it in the form of domestic manuals or even in the shape of women's magazines. Women continue to be thought of as requiring careful and specialist guidance in inhabiting the new identities that become available to them, in the case of *Sananda*, that of a new middle class, marked by its consumption practices, confident use of English and certain embodied ideals. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, within consumerism the human body, and especially the aging human body becomes something to be managed, reshaped, controlled, produced as 'docile'. The following section enquires into the production of these bodies, as evidence through advice present in *Sananda*.



## II

In this section, I closely analyse three issues of *Sananda*, published on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2012, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2013 and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2014 respectively. Each of these featured cover stories that aimed to teach the readers how to negotiate with the aging process, and how to manage it best. The cover articles were titled '*Boyosh Baruk Anonde*' (may your age advance with joy), 'Happy @ Forty' (transcribed in Bengali letters) and 'Fit @ Forty' (also transcribed in Bengali letters), respectively. In trying to answer the question, 'What is old', Rodan, Ellis and Lebeck describe the 'plethora of subcategories' present in contemporary research into ageing: such as, the 'disabled elderly', the frail old age, the 'deep old age', 'young-old' (people between 60-80 years), the 'old-old' (above 80) etc. (114). While these myriad categories and their intersectionalities indicate the complex and fluid nature of age, especially of old age, none of these, in terms of numbers, start as early 40. In contrast, *Sananda* ageing advice is specifically addressed to 40 year olds, while anti-aging products (e.g. Pond's Age Miracle cream and serum) target people at the cusp of 30s.

The 2012 article informs its readers, 'Change is the only constant' (also transcribed in Bengali). 'You have to accept the 'you' that changes with age and time. An increase in age doesn't mean that life has to shut down' (12).

The 2013 cover feature asserts

A gradual increase in age has brought you to the threshold of forty. You have left behind school, college, friends and the associated excitement, hullabaloo, to reach another side of life. Your body, your mind, bear the marks of time, of age. Still it is difficult to accept the truth. You probably think that the slim body of twenty years ago is now absent, the excitement associated to

building and 'performing' a family with husband and children has gone missing, having spent all your days, time and energy upon them—they are now busy with themselves (15).

Therefore, the writers conclude, an emptiness is bound to creep in, one that needs to be fought by spending, contradictorily, both more time with oneself and with others, and by taking care of oneself, of both the parts of the Cartesian dual, the mind and the body.

This pattern and these assumptions are replicated in a similar cover feature the next year as well, although the happy 'old' person of the previous issue has now been replaced by a 'fit' one.

Almost imperceptibly, you've crossed 30 and are on the threshold of the forties. Now you have a full life with husband, children and a career. There is no dearth of comfort or of luxury. You are doing well with biannual holiday trips, weekend parties, get togethers. But in spite of all this, there is a thorn in your happiness, your bulging midriff or the extra fat deposits on your back. The 20 year old slim and trim you having disappeared many years ago. The fitness of the 30s is also virtually non-existent. You have slowly learnt to accept this body that changes with time. But somehow, it is simply not possible to accept the weight gain that accompanies this change. ..but, do you know, it is possible to be thin and fit even at forty? (13-14)

Let us break down these articles to their constituent elements: each is written by Rituparna Ray and Aparajita Panda (then regular *Sananda* staff, but both have left the organisation since)—this information means nothing because they have also regularly written a host of other similar and dissimilar articles. Each article has one or two central women in the accompanying photographs. They are seen eating, reading, exercising and spending time with people of the same age.

The 2012 article also has a male figure in some of the images, presumably the husband. In each of the instances the articles address the reader directly, although using the formal 'aapni' (you), which is the established practice in *Sananda* now—stating clearly that the magazine has brought to the readers authoritative information and advice about how best to manage the aging process. They never ask, albeit rhetorically, whether the fact of aging, at almost-40, is at all daunting, and assume that it must be so. How do these writers (both around 32-34 years of age, at the timing of writing these articles) have the authority to impart advice to aging women about how best to age? Their authority doesn't rest in their familiarity with what they are writing, in fact the content across years remain virtually the same, but are drawn from two sources. One, the authority of the magazine itself, placed as the arbiter and distributor of knowledge among their readership, and second (although not in the case of the 2012 article), in their presenting 'expert' advice to the reader.

Who are these experts? In 2013, they are two consultant psychiatrists, an infertility specialist and a laproscopic surgeon—although the actual space devoted to what they have to say is one fifth of the article, the rest, especially the diet, weight loss and fitness advice as well as the beauty advice doesn't have an expert disseminating their knowledge. It is curious to note that in 2014 however, all the experts consulted and quoted are: an eminent dietician, a fitness expert and a bariatric and laproscopic surgeon—figures squarely in the middle of contemporary body politics and its obsession with slenderness. The figure of the expert, especially that of the fitness expert, in India, is curious, since there is hardly any certification available in fitness practices, and the established mode of study, i.e, physical education is not the degree that any of the so called fitness experts hold. But in the case of women's magazines, the invocation of experts, is an age old and established practice: as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English show in *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*.

Who receives the advice that the magazine carefully collates? Each of the articles clearly states, the cis-woman in their writings is at the cusp of her forties, located in nuclear heterosexual, presumably Hindu and upper caste families, with children and husband. They may or may not have a career, however they have invested considerable time and energy in making these families happy and now they suffer from an emptiness, and need to recenter themselves to both tackle the changes that time poses to their bodies, but also to stabilise their embodied identities from going out of bounds. They have to maintain this body machine.

The likening of the body to a machine that needs to be maintained is an increasingly popular contemporary metaphor. Mike Featherstone links it to the increase in consumption of goods, when, "Like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency. The tendency to transform free time into maintenance work imposes even greater demands on the individual and makes the monitoring of the current state of bodily performance essential if individuals are to get the most out of life" (24).

The imperative to get the most out of life, for women who are aging (and even if they did not think so, the magazine would make them think, regularly, once a year), is perhaps stronger than in the ones younger than them. The implicit assumption is that aging is a negative process, it signals, at 40, the decay (of mental abilities, bodily functions and appearance) of the coming years. Featherstone has commented upon how, every visual image of the human body, is after all, that of a person aging. But, on everyday interactions, especially with people one is close to—aging is not always at the surface of our reactions to their appearance (1995), For *Sananda* however, although repeatedly reassuring the readers that change is a fact of life, aging is deemed to be a crisis, that needs to be managed in the best way possible.

Much of the common sense for altered bodies that now need to be micromanaged, is associated in the magazine with menopause, although it is dealt with directly only once in the 2014 article, in the context of what to eat, during and after menopause. Although the general thrust of the largest portion of the magazine during any issue (except perhaps the special annual issues on travel and fiction) is towards 'manage'ing one's unruly body, the implication in the aging articles is that, unlike in one's youth, the body becomes more and more unruly, more out of bounds. Interestingly, this is perfectly in keeping with the contemporary investment in body cultures where the body, and especially women's bodies are thought of as forever in the grips of insatiable appetites, and in the case of these ageing advice articles, the ageing woman's body is even more so. Her biologicity makes her prone to 'cravings', and the article advises how these insatiable appetites must be regulated with 'safe', 'healthy' foods. So the craving for cake, pastry, carbohydrate, *rumali ruti*, *mishti*, *bhaja*, sugar, chocolate, soft drinks, must be carefully managed by eating whole fruits and whole grains, apricots, dates, raisins and pomegranate instead.

Susan Bordo (2003) has long reminded us that taking care of one's physical appearance has become a moral imperative in Western societies. : self-control and will power are symbolized in muscular, trim, fit bodies while overweight bodies symbolize laziness and lack of control. Several studies based in India do the same, noting that after financial liberalisation, India has emerged as one of the largest destinations for health, fitness and wellness industries. A sizeable middle class's need to mark itself as such through consumptions activities also includes consumption that is oriented towards the body: products and services both.

Aging therefore is constantly at tension with the appearance of youthfulness, the bearer of all value. Calasanti and Slevin hold that

there has been a 'blurring of age boundaries resulting in an accelerated breakdown in the demarcation between mature and youthful bodies'; attested through consumer messages suggesting 'an obligation to discipline bodies through diet and exercise throughout the life course' (Slevin 1004). Within this increasingly medicalized ideology, growing old is seen as a disease that can be remedied if one is committed to "aging successfully." Aging successfully requires management, control, production of docile bodies, and *Sananda* is at hand to teach the readers those.

'Positive aging', according to Featherstone and Hepworth, emerged out of the social gerontological attempt to displace negative images of aging by positive alternatives (29). While it is never possible to draw a direct correlations between developments in specialist research and representations in popular media (such as that of active 'young-old' people in physically taxing activities), images of 'positive aging' nevertheless seem to be increasingly present in different cultural spheres. *Sananda* is not an exception—however, *Sananda*'s contribution to the discourse of positive aging is limited to its exhortations to the aging individual, to remain 'positive'. 'Become friends with your grandchildren', because that would help you in keeping 'up-to-date', the 2012 article teaches (14). 'Spend time with yourself...don't you think early morning walks upon grass wet with dew, will make you feel happy?' (2013, 16). 'Go out for shopping', learn intelligent dressing, plan get togethers, celebrations, grand dinner (2014, 16- 22). But the underlying assumption in all three articles remains the same, to learn techniques of self care, and techniques of the body that would enable that care. Therefore, 'In the case of exercises, one must remember, unless your core muscles are very strong, you mustn't attempt exercises like dead lift, heavy weight squat etc.' (2014, 24). 'If one exercises and diets as a matter of routine, muscle mass can easily be increased...do stretching, yogasana, meditation and pranayama' (2013, 25). 'Just, take the advice

of a dietician once. In general, we'll tell you, there is no need to eat food that is extra spicy' (2012, 19).

As a lifestyle magazine *Sananda* is also uniquely geared towards the consuming subject, ageing gracefully, within its pages, doesn't mean an abrupt end to former consumer practices, but instead, as each of the three articles asserts, a greater focus upon conscious consumption, geared towards the individual. Watching a good film, going out for dinner, going shopping—dressing intelligently, regularly using cleansing milk, skin tonic, moisturiser, deep conditioning with primrose oil—in short all words that define the contemporary *Sananda* woman, between 25 and 45, are repeatedly invoked to remind the 40 year old that all the trapping of her embodied and consuming femininity can continue unabated even 15 years down the line.

Desire, in these cases, is many fold. There is the desire for the domestic that seem to have prompted these women's denial of their selves—in fact this is a recurring trope in *Sananda* across different kinds of content, taking time out for one self, taking care of one's own body, paying attention to one's intellectual and physical needs are all that have been neglected in the face of domestic, familial duties. Therefore, while within the ambit of the family, self care practices are considered to be potentially empowering and therefore, necessary. And if these self care practices go hand in hand with an ever increasing world of consumerism, all the better.

However, the desire for the domestic nevertheless circumscribes these self care techniques. Concerns for biological children and husband is paramount, leading often to a disavowal of one's own needs, and the woman is repeatedly chastised that at least at the ripe old age for forty, she must learn to do things that take care of her. This is also a recurring trope in TV serials that offer makeovers to men and women. *10 years*

*younger in 10 days* is an Australian television series of 2009, where the presenter repeatedly points out to the aged contestants that their lifestyles, jobs, their roles as grandmothers etc. have contributed to wearing them out (Rodan, 114). Although the *Sananda* readers are imagined as much younger, the logic of care as a potential drag is present here as well. But that doesn't enable *Sananda* to question the role of women as primary caregivers, instead, asks them to increase the circuit of care to include oneself as well. That these women might also be people who experience sexual desire, is never acknowledged.

While the desire for a specific kind of domestic, available only through heterosexual conjugality informs the universe of the ageing *Sananda* woman, there is a cursory nod to the single woman, in the 2013 cover feature. In the section titled (and transcribed in Bengali) 'Single after Forty', single women are reassured that that age is not a barrier for finding the desired life partner, however, if one does consciously take the decision of being single—and the note of pity is quite manifest, she is advised to find ways to keep busy all day long. Unlike the others, the advice directed to these women is largely about planning one's finances, making friends with younger people and being active on social networking sites. The body work that was deemed extremely necessary for the married women to continue to feel desired, is completely absent in this case. Only once, in the 2013 article, the readers are advised, in case of dryness during intercourse one might consider using lubricating gels, yet another way to manage uncomfortable physical changes.

To feel desired, as opposed to being an actively desiring subject forms the fulcrum around which these articles are constructed. That men and boys from 8 to 80 no longer look admiringly at this aging body ('Plan your diet', 2014, 14), the vacuum in the scopic regime that this woman was supposedly comfortable in inhabiting, gives birth to a crisis.

The solutions are many fold: hair spa and pedicure once a month, actively practicing body techniques that would give birth to a 'maintained' body, the judicious use of makeup and clothes, etc. all this, to be desired.

If this fails, however, the 2012 article has another solution in hand. After the futile pursuit of a youthful ideal, that is after all the only desirable body in contemporary body cultures, comes the revered and desirable mental peace. Just as a thin body was earlier thought of as a testimony to a mind in control, in charge of itself, the attainment of mental peace will also be reflected in one's appearance. The narrative is self contradictory, the reader wonders how, having failed in pursuing the youthful body which is after all the desirable ideal, one would then attain contentment. But if the reader was to suspend disbelief for an instant, she will be told that 'if you are content, engrossed in oneself, that contentment will automatically be manifest in your appearance'. Then, wrinkles will not matter anymore, and grey hair would still make one the most beautiful woman in the world (14).

What then is the site of desire for this aging subject? As long as she can mould her body enough to retain a youthful appearance, she is the object of desire, the inhabitant of a scopoc regime which seems to be the only site in which her desiring self can function. But when one fails to attain this, the movement must be inwards, into the psyche, away from the embodied selfhood, into peace and contentment. After all, each of the three articles assert, 'each age has its own dharma, it is impossible to challenge it and still do well' (2012, 14). Dharma, religion, as befits each age, is then the final reconciliation the magazine offers its aging readers—either beat appearances of age, or be reconciled to being an undesiring and undesirable subject.

## Notes

- i. The Bengali word 'Sananda' can be translated into the feminine form of the word joyful. All the Sanandas, as referred to in the advertisement, would then be all the joyous women, who have also incidentally been *Sananda* readers.
- ii. Literature is present in contemporary *Sananda* in the form of a short story and one or two serialised novels that are included in every issue. Special issues often contain five short stories and the Durga Puja issue several novellas. There is also a small and dedicated poetry section in every issue of the magazine.
- iii. Biswas, Samata. "Reading Fitness: Body Cultures in Contemporary India". Ph D Thesis. English and Foreign Languages University. 2015.

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## The Problematic Danseuse: Reclaiming Space to Dance the Lived Feminine

Nirmala Seshadri

### Abstract

Classical dance training and its performance may be viewed as a jettisoning of the dancer's real life experience instead of its inclusion. Rather than move in autonomy and authenticity, the dancer's body is disciplined into presenting itself within prescribed boundaries. Various societal forces collude to discipline the female dancer into conformity. Against this backdrop, I call the female Bharatanatyam dancer who defies societal yardsticks of acceptability, resisting disciplinarity to present her lived feminine - The Problematic Danseuse. In this practice-led research paper I examine, through the lenses of history, performance aesthetics and presentation, the approaches towards and challenges of representing the lived feminine through Bharatanatyam. Even as continued transgression may result in the marginalization and eventual erasure of the Problematic Danseuse, I emphasize that this act of erasing the Problematic Danseuse who does not fit conveniently into the mainstream agenda is after all, embedded in the history and emergence of the transfigured Bharatanatyam. Highlighting the various hegemonic forces that conspire to suppress the Problematic Danseuse in various ways, I propose that creators of alternative works in Bharatanatyam acknowledge that they occupy a different space, thus presenting their work in settings that facilitate the gradual building of viewership and a critical mass that seeks engagement, challenge and societal

transformation. I suggest that in the treatment and resistance of the Problematic Danseuse lie the basis for some form of solidarity with other women who have expressed their lived feminine emphatically, in time past and present that might support her persistence in critiquing status quo and searching for alternate paradigms both within Bharatanatyam and in its wider sociocultural context.

“It is understood that the Danseuse (nartaki) should be very lovely, young, with full round breasts, self-confident, charming, agreeable, dexterous in handling the critical passages ... with wide-open eyes ... adorned with costly jewels, with a charming lotus-face, neither very stout nor very thin, nor very tall nor very short” (Nandikesvara 1917: 15-16).

The *Abhinaya Darpana* (13<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Bharata's *Natyasastra* (200 BCE-300 CE), serve as key texts in a Bharatanatyam dancer's training. The messaging of the above verse from the *Abhinaya Darpana* is loud and clear – the female dancer is the object of the societal and, more specifically, the male gaze. How does the modern-day 'danseuse' re-present her performance body to shift it from the male or externally-defined representation?

In the years that I have lived in Singapore and India, I have experienced classical dance training and its performance as a jettisoning of the dancer's real life experience rather than its inclusion. Highlighting the separation between the lived and performance bodies of the female classical dancer, dance scholar Urmimala Sarkar Munsi states, “the reality of her everyday life is put aside, as she reclaims her tradition through her body and performance - entering into an imaginary realm of a world that begins and ends with the performance itself, and does not have anything to do with the everyday reality of the body” (2014: 307). Rather than move in autonomy and authenticity, the dancer's body is disciplined into presenting itself within the prescribed boundaries.

According to Sarkar Munsi, “locating the female body within the historically derived public domain of the patriarchal society has silenced any bodily activities or at least muted them in and through classical dance” (2014: 308). Various societal forces collude to discipline the female dancer into conformity. Against this backdrop, I call the female Bharatanatyam dancer who defies societal yardsticks of acceptability, resisting disciplinarity to present her lived feminine - The Problematic Danseuse.

In this practice-led research paper I examine, through the lenses of history, performance aesthetics and presentation, the approaches towards and challenges of representing the lived feminine through Bharatanatyam. I view the Bharatanatyam dancer's portrayal of the lived feminine through three broad modes: 1. the display of the erotic, 2. the challenging of gender norms and other social structures, and 3. the representation of the authentic experience of modern realities, drawing primarily upon my choreographic works<sup>1</sup> – *Outcaste Eternal* (1999), *Eighteen Minutes* (2002), *Crossroads* (2003) and *Radha Now* (2006). As a Bharatanatyam practitioner, native Singaporean and a non-resident Indian dancer who thirsted for knowledge and acceptance both in Singapore and Chennai, I place myself as an embodied subject in this phenomenological analysis of my body and its expression. I could view myself as a participant observer in the field but given that I have remained on the margins both by virtue of not being truly at home in either location, as well as the fact that I gradually became the Problematic Danseuse myself, I would call myself the insider/outsider in the arena of Bharatanatyam, thus aiming to bring into this paper my ethnographic and auto-ethnographic perspectives that arise from this position.

Even as continued transgression may result in the marginalization and eventual erasure of the Problematic Danseuse, I argue that in her treatment and resistance lie the basis for some form

of solidarity with other women who have expressed their lived feminine emphatically, in time past and present, that might support her persistence in critiquing status quo and searching for alternate paradigms both within Bharatanatyam and in its wider sociocultural context.

### Expressing the Lived Feminine

The “lived feminine” is a concept adopted by feminist scholars to facilitate the emergence for women, of meaningful and empowering alternatives to male-instituted models. While supporting the notion of sexual differentiation, feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti states: “being a woman is always there as an ontological precondition for a female subject’s existential becoming (1994:102). Elizabeth Grosz insists on “the irreducible specificity of women’s bodies, the bodies of all women, independent of class, race and history” (1994: 207). In a world that privileges the male voice and perspective, it becomes important for women to convey their “lived feminine” and I quote Luce Irigaray, who says, “the ‘masculine’ is not prepared to share the initiative of discourse. It prefers to experiment with speaking, writing, enjoying ‘woman’ rather than leaving to that other any right to intervene, to ‘act’ in her own interests” (1985: 157). The opening verse from the *Abhinaya Darpana* comes to mind. Expressing the lived feminine carries multi-pronged potential - empowerment in women arising from the agency and authenticity of expression, the gradual development of awareness and possible transformation in society. Dance, with its emphasis and connection to the corporeal, its negotiation with physical space and tools for non-verbal communication can serve as a powerful and effective medium for lending tangibility to the female dancer’s reality. Indeed, these expressions offer a fresh perspective, “the point of view of the feminine subject” (Lehtinen 2014: 85).

I examine issues surrounding the expression of the Bharatanatyam dancer’s lived feminine through three approaches,

namely: portrayal of eroticism, critiquing of gender norms, and expression of her personal lived experience. I discuss the creation and presentation of my artistic work, reactions evoked within the socio-cultural context (including audiences), my interactions and observations in the field as well as challenges posed to such expression in the context of the globalized<sup>2</sup> dance form - Bharatanatyam.

### 1. Her Dance is TOO Erotic

After all, I was depicting Radha<sup>3</sup> and Krishna<sup>4</sup> in a post-coital moment. I felt the strong need to include my own experience as a woman and to allow for the expressions to be less stylized, to depict an everyday reality. Instead of restricting my abhinaya to focus on the face and hand gestures alone, I extended it to include the rest of my body. Radha in this verse has been referred to as the Swadhinapatika nayika [heroine], one who is in command of her lover. I therefore introduced body positions and movements that I felt would convey this stance in a sexual connotation. Since Radha was seeking to prolong the moment and have Krishna indulge her in various ways, I interpreted the verse to be the interim between two sexual climaxes and this was represented through bodily abhinaya<sup>5</sup> (Seshadri 2011: 6; 2018: 118-9).

In the experimental Bharatanatyam duet *Crossroads* (2003) that was primarily an exploration of gender through the recontextualization of the conventional Bharatanatyam *margam* (repertoire), I chose to perform as my solo piece the *ashtapad*<sup>6</sup> *Kuru Yadunandana* from Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda*<sup>7</sup>. While earlier versions were performed in the prescribed and acceptable manner, it was when preparing for the 2006 staging in Chennai at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha<sup>8</sup> that I was inspired to push the boundaries of my expression to reflect my personal



interpretation of the poem as well as my authentic experience as a woman.

As the piece progressed in its intensity, the final pose saw me in a supine position and with both my legs raised to depict heightened sexual enjoyment, laced with suggestions of autoeroticism. To my surprise, my lighting designer dimmed the lights prematurely leaving me to complete the piece in darkness, contradicting what was originally planned. Later he told me that he had made the decision to shield me from the audience gaze, given what he had understood of the general mindset, thus censoring me based on his own cultural viewpoint. An audience member told me that a group of young girls looked visibly uncomfortable and stood up to leave the auditorium. Appearing curious at the same time, they waited at the door, until the end. Later one of my key musicians commented that my rendition of the *ashtapadi* was "too erotic". These reactions suggest to me that I had crossed a line in terms of the expression of *sringara* (erotic love).

After the 2008 Singapore staging of the same performance, the contemporary artists and some general audience members were openly appreciative of my solo piece, but the Bharatanatyam community offered me little feedback. It is plausible to read their lack of feedback as a negative response, given the usual sharing that takes place among them on social media after any performance. This reading gains even more credibility when seen against the fact that these same students were not entirely silent about the performance as a whole - they expressed approval of my male collaborator's dance, while remaining silent about mine. Underscoring my reading of the silence as critique was a note I received from a Singapore-based female dancer and scholar who referred to my piece as "a big bold step which requires tremendous courage on your part ... ". Her comment about courage was mirrored - albeit in a less laudatory manner - in a question posed to

me in 2015 by a male interviewer from an established Indian arts organization in Singapore (Institution 1): "People say your dance is too erotic?" In general, the reactions emphasized that the mainstream Bharatanatyam community does not welcome these explorations in sensual expression. Even for the female dancer and scholar who was open to the work, there was a recognition that it demanded "tremendous courage".

Another production that evoked such recognition was the 2008 staging of my dance theatre work *Outcaste Eternal* (1999) in Chennai that highlighted the true story of a lone woman's battle against a misogynistic society. In their post-show communications with me, two leading dancers in the field had also used the words "brave" and "courageous attempt". Both dancers seemed to acknowledge that works that test boundaries and challenge the status quo are up against hegemonic forces. Censorship of the Chennai performance began with the requirement from the authorities that we amend the script in parts. Then came the instruction from representatives of the government-run Museum Theatre (our performance venue) who had attended the stage rehearsal, to cut out the final pose of one sequence. This seduction scene had two characters, male and female, lying horizontal together on stage, the female protagonist (myself) suggestively placing her lower leg over his before the lights are dimmed, to suggest triumph.

Dance critic Rupa Srikanth's review that appeared in the leading mainstream newspaper The Hindu emphasizes the expectations of "dignity" that are placed on a Bharatanatyam dancer. Srikanth writes:

Strong words work well in theatre, but the stylization in dance presupposes a certain measure of restraint ... The graphic detailing of the sexual encounters left nothing to imagination; such scenes actually bring down art to its lowest denominator...

It must be mentioned here that the square stance that Nirmala adopted in her soliloquy, Odissi *chauka*<sup>9</sup>-style, also did not do her dignified dance any credit (2008).

Irigaray's emphasis - on altering the feminine style "as an excess that exceeds common sense", rather than reproducing or limiting its expression within the parameters of masculine discourse (Lehtinen 2014: 78), becomes pertinent here. It lends tangibility to the existence of strict boundaries in Bharatanatyam, evident through the praise I received for my "courage" as well in Srikanth's writing which reflects the imposition of self-control, the denial of freedom for sexual expression and ultimately the demand that the Bharatanatyam dancer reflect a level of purity that invokes caste-based stratifications<sup>10</sup>.

The existence of Bharatanatyam rests, after all, on the expunging of the hereditary Devadasi<sup>11</sup> dancer as a result of "a female sexuality that was exercised outside the acceptable borders of middle class and upper caste womanhood"<sup>12</sup> (Hubel 2005: 133). Sociologist Amrit Srinivasan's seminal paper *The Hindu Temple-Dancer: Prostitute or Nun?* describes the Devadasi as a "good and holy creature", now "corrupted" and to be replaced. The revivalists (E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi Arundale), whose role it was to return the art form to its "pristine glory", operated within notions of "past purity" and "present sin", in weeding out the "profane" aspects of the "sacred" dance form (1983: 90, 95-96). Various aspects of the Devadasi's dance form *Sadir* are said to have been discarded in its purification/sanitization. Songs or parts of songs that were considered overtly erotic were erased from the repertoire (Allen 1997: 225). *Rati-mudras* (sexual hand gestures) denoting various postures in sexual union that are described in medieval Sanskrit treatises on erotics including the *Kamasutra*, have been removed, terms such as "samarati (man on top), uparati (woman on top, also *viparitarati*), and *nagabandhamu* (bodies coiled in the serpent

position) [having been] common parlance among the women" (Soneji 2004: 43). These gestures and postures emphasize the existence of eroticism in Bharatanatyam's past, and do not exist in the form today.

There has been some resistance from certain quarters against this de-eroticisation<sup>13</sup> but the process continued unabated<sup>14</sup>. There was no place for eroticism in the newly invented Bharatanatyam. In this scenario where religiosity (*bhakti*) overshadowed sensuality, it was reverence and submission that was expected of the dancer. The Bharatanatyam dancer's body came to be disciplined into imbibing and projecting 'sacredness'. Sarkar Munsii highlights that the training in classical Indian dance imbues the dancer with "rules of rightness, social correctness..." and a cognizance of "socially acceptable viewership". "The bodily values of right and wrong are so deeply embedded in the minds and the bodies of these dancers, that the comfort zone of expressivity remains structured by these value systems all their lives" (2014: 307).

Literary scholar Teresa Hubel recalls the total lack of eroticism at Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra<sup>15</sup> during her time there as a student, realizing later that "the existence of Kalakshetra - with its *bhakti*-minus-sringara-oriented dance - was predicated on the absence of the Devadasis ... draw[ing] inspiration from ancient Sanskrit texts such as the *Natya Sastra* and *Abhinaya Darpanam*" (2005: 135). This ethos percolated into Singapore where three of the oldest Indian performing arts institutions, which I shall call Institution 1, 2 and 3, demonstrate reliance on Kalakshetra. Institution 1 with its Kalakshetra-trained teachers who are brought to Singapore to teach has existed for decades alongside Institution 2 whose founder was a graduate of Kalakshetra. In more recent years, even Institution 3, whose founder was trained in the Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam<sup>16</sup>, also imports Kalakshetra graduates to teach Bharatanatyam. The slant of these established

institutions demonstrates the extent of influence of Kalakshetra on the Bharatanatyam community in Singapore, directly or indirectly. Dance scholar Avanthi Meduri underscores the role of Rukmini Devi in the globalization of Bharatanatyam through Devi's strong connection with the Theosophical Society (2004: 16). New and complex issues surround the form in a diverse global location such as Singapore - of ethnic identity, belonging, nostalgia, exoticism, multiculturalism, as well as Indian nationalism that is increasingly mobile. These issues collude to freeze the form in what is considered its 'authentic' state or 'sanitized' versions that are close to it.

Hence while the Bharatanatyam scene in Chennai witnessed a return to *sringara* starting in the 1970s with the return of Kalanidhi Narayanan, a Brahmin woman who had been trained by Devadasi teachers, it was only 30 years later (in 2012) that Narayanan's style of *abhinaya* was taught and performed in Singapore by her senior students through brief workshops and performances organized by Institution 2. This 30-year gap, in my opinion, demonstrates the freezing of the sanitized form in the Singapore setting. While Narayanan's presence did heighten the emphasis on *sringara*, it was arguably imparted and presented in an 'acceptable' manner. Pioneering contemporary Indian dance choreographer Chandralekha's return to *sringara* in the 1980s, on the other hand, was marked by a total rejection of traditional male-focused *sringara* as well as *bhakti*, but through an emphasis on the corporeal. Both in Singapore and later in Chennai, I do not recall hearing about Chandralekha's work in mainstream Bharatanatyam circles. I became aware of the confident portrayal of female strength and sexuality when I witnessed her work - *Sloka* in Bangalore in 1999 and *Sharira* in Chennai in 2004, at her own intimate theatre space. According to the program notes *Sharira* "celebrates the living body in which sexuality, sensuality and spirituality co-exist" (Katrak 2011: 47). The stark costumes, slow and stretched movements, evocative music, powerful

lighting and the meeting and intertwining of two bodies – male and female, left me both shocked and spellbound, inspiring further my own feminist choreographic approach. Indeed, the productions of present-day choreographers such as Anita Ratnam, Hari Krishnan and others in the field reverberate with the influence of Chandralekha (Katrak 2011: 53), the lone choreographer in the 1980s who dared to question patriarchal aspects of Bharatanatyam and sought to provide an empowering alternative to the "bejewelled semi-divine nayika" (Chatterjea 2004: 48) who constantly pined for and praised an absent lover/god - invariably a man.

Chandralekha's work drew some discomfort and skepticism from the dominant forces of Bharatanatyam, including the traditional dance gurus and connoisseurs as well as sections of the mainstream media. Art historian Ashish Khokar explains how the audience in Mumbai exited the auditorium half way through the performance of *Sharira* (2007). He scathingly writes that Chandralekha's works produced after 1995 were "either soft-porn or a celebration of erotica" (*ibid*). As for the textually erotic Kshetranya<sup>17</sup> *padams* (expressive pieces) and Jayadeva *ashtapadis* that are taught and performed, while the male poet has been granted the license to express the erotic sans boundaries, the female dancer is placed within rigid confines.

I have come to understand that the danseuse who questions and challenges the normative representations, particularly with regards to sexuality, is a source of great discomfort and experiences some degree of marginalization. The silencing and erasure of the Problematic Danseuse, is after all, tied into the history of Bharatanatyam.

## 2. Visually Unexciting

I am wearing a skirt and a blouse. As the music begins, I stand on the dimly lit raised platform (that was used to denote male

space at the very opening of the work) and begin to remove the skirt that I am wearing to reveal a pair of short trousers. At the same time, ten bare-chested men enter and are seen wrapping skirts around their dhotis<sup>18</sup>. We begin to perform the Ras Leela<sup>19</sup>; I at the center as they dance around me. At various points in the piece, I dance separately with each of the ten men. As I wait, can I pass my time, playing their game?

In *Radha Now* (2006), the Radha-Krishna myth was interlaced with my own personal, socio-cultural and artistic history, memory and questions. In conceptualizing the work, my artistic collaborator Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, also a film historian and translator, and I examined the asymmetrical gender dynamic and patriarchal underpinnings in the religious, practical and representational aspects of Bharatanatyam and its wider societal framework. Role reversal and female centrality were explored as possible alternatives to the existing patriarchal paradigm. The work was devised as a performance by one female Bharatanatyam dancer (myself) with ten male Bharatanatyam dancers (Seshadri 2011: 8).

*Radha Now* involved questioning the validity of an old and cherished myth that has placed the woman in a subordinate position. Women's studies scholar Elizabeth Grosz stresses on the importance of "critique and construct" in the feminist approach, for it to rise above "anti-sexist theory" (1990: 59). Both Grosz and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak emphasize the double-pronged nature of the feminist process. The first stage is the reaction and critique of the existing status quo and the next stage is the proposition of alternatives (Grosz 1990; Spivak 1981). *Radha Now* attempted to re-envision the myth to elevate the status and representation of the woman.

I found tremendous support and sensitivity from the Chennai cast of male dancers, all of whom had or were still training at Kalakshetra.

*Radha Now* was first presented in Dublin, the three-level discotheque at the ITC Park Sheraton Hotel in Chennai. Given the exploratory and subversive nature of the work, Sankaranarayan and I chose to present it first at an intimate and informal setting. Dublin seemed most suitable given that the hotel was willing to lend us unquestioning support and that it was a space we felt was free from the hegemonic glare of the conventional performance spaces in Chennai. Also, the layout of the space offered scope for conveying our concept. The venue, according to our male dancers, unsettled members of the higher management at Kalakshetra, who in my view represent a significant section of the establishment in the Bharatanatyam scene. The male dancers were admonished by the then director of Kalakshetra for performing Bharatanatyam at a bar (that served alcohol). Interestingly, the dancers told us they had, in the past, represented Kalakshetra at performances in hotels in the city, where alcohol was served while they danced, which was not the case here. In the case of *Radha Now*, the decision of location was an integral part of the work, and from this angle too, the work may have been viewed as subversive.

Post-performance audience remarks both after the 2005 Chennai and 2011 Singapore performances revealed a palpable discomfort with the feminist interception of the form. Also, for the general audiences of Bharatanatyam, there appears to be a culturally essentialist expectation of how the female dancer ought to be presented. In a milieu where audiences have been accustomed to titillation through fast-paced and energetic *jathis* (rhythmic sequences), a woman in her late 40s who is dressed in everyday attire, articulating her critique, questions and aspirations is perhaps not easy on the eye nor comfortable for the mind!

The transfer of focus from *sringara* to *bhakti* and the entry of Nataraja<sup>20</sup> as a symbol in the revival period created a shift to privileging

speed, religiosity and the male dancer in what was a female centric form. According to scholar Mathew Allen, "The ananda tandava, 'blissful vigorous dance', of Nataraja, described and sometimes even mimed by the new generation of dancers was in a manner totally foreign to the lasya, graceful and feminine, Devadasi dance practice" (1997: 80).

Did the female Bharatanatyam dancer necessarily want to dance in this fast-paced and strenuous way? This was one strand of questioning in *Radha Now* that opened with a fast *trikaala*<sup>21</sup> *jathi*, progressing through a series of questions to close with a slow-paced *alarippu*<sup>22</sup> that carries traces of that first *jathi*. The final scene is performed in water to facilitate this slowing down as well as to symbolically heal the female dancer from a lifetime of rigid prescriptions, disciplinarity and the burden of cultural custodianship. *No more music, rhythm, narrative, abhinaya, sringara or bhakti. Only healing, rejuvenation and peace.*

Read against the backdrop of my prior experiences I perceived a sense of unease in the hesitant smiles, awkward silences and an absence of any discussion both in Chennai and in Singapore. This we had expected, especially given the general resistance of the establishment to new work. While this resistance, in my experience, plays its part in inspiring experimentation, it can also prevent meaningful dialogue and constructive criticism that can be extremely valuable in artistic development. In such a climate, I have to take refuge in Chandralekha and draw inspiration from her when she says, "My work is small. It reaches out to a few people to whom it makes a crucial difference and with them one has the possibility of a creative dialogue" (quoted in Bharucha 1995: 187). Chandralekha made these remarks in connection with negative criticism that she received in the press after one of her productions was staged (Bharucha 1995: 186).

While I believe that criticism is an important aspect of the artistic process, I have learnt that the establishment is a powerfully resistive

force that attempts to clamp down on The Problematic Danseuse in various ways. I have also come to understand that works such as *Radha Now* that are rooted in Bharatanatyam and yet question and challenge gender norms, seeking to reverse the male centrality both in dance and society might need to be recognized by the creators themselves as alternative and presented in non-mainstream and intimate settings and to selected audiences, as a means of gradually building viewership and a critical mass that seeks engagement, challenge and societal transformation.

### 3. Let's Snuff Her Out

In 2002, I [created] my full-length work Moments in Time. It was a presentation of the traditional repertoire in the first two segments – The Homecoming and Loving Man and God in Movement ... However, in the final segment Eighteen Minutes, I stepped out of these aspects of the traditional framework to present my choreography that addressed a personal question, "if I had only eighteen minutes, where would I be, what would I do?" The eighteen-minute piece introduced the concepts of impermanence, unconditional love and detachment (Seshadri 2011: 5).

The first two segments had me in the typical and elaborate Bharatanatyam garb, dancing pieces from the Bharatanatyam repertoire portraying love, yearning, separation, sensuality, sexual encounters and also infidelity. Surprisingly, it was *Eighteen Minutes* that evoked objection.

Narayanan, from whom I was receiving specialized training in *abhinaya* at the time, attended my Chennai performance. She was gracious, supportive and even came back stage before the performance to bless me. A few days later in class, she asked me, "You are so good at your classical, why do you need to present your modern work on the

same stage?" (Personal communication) I had chosen to express my personal aspirations and to embrace the transience – choosing to spend my limited time on an imaginary beach, walking on the sand, reveling in my body, mind and spirit, spending precious moments with an illusory lover, bonding with a girl child and finally departing with grace and gratitude. At this point, I return to Irigaray who says: "I consider it a mistake to divide my work into parts that are foreign to one another. Its becoming is more continuous and the way it develops is close to that of a living being" (2002:200). Narayanan's response revealed to me that my attempt towards an integrated representation of my various facets as a dancer and as a woman was not favored. Irigaray's concept of a "spiritual-embodied unity" is what I seek to move towards which, "in phenomenology of the body, is considered as structurally similar to the lived body" (Lehtinen 2014: 17).

A few months later I was invited to perform at the NRI<sup>23</sup> Festival organized in Hyderabad by the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Department. I decided to present *Moments In Time* and sent the organizers all the required preliminary material, including a synopsis of the work and publicity images. They had raised no concerns at the time regarding the work. I had completed the first two segments following which I changed into my purple sleeveless top and black trousers and began the final piece. Twelve minutes into *Eighteen Minutes*, the organizers turned off my lights and sound as they felt I was performing ballet movements and my costume was indecent. The scene I was performing was one in which I was in a supine position on stage to depict the bonding between mother and child. The theme was expressed through *abhinaya* and not ballet, a form in which I have not trained. I had thought (somewhat naively) that as an NRI dancer, the value I would bring was the reflection of my authentic experience of living in a diasporic environment, along with my simultaneous connection to India. It was then that I understood the expected role of a non-resident Indian – to

perpetuate status quo as opposed to adopting an individualistic approach.

Bharatanatyam is positioned as the cultural touchstone of the diaspora for whom India represents an imagined homeland. The purity, acceptability, sacredness and link that had been drawn by the revivalists to India's ancient history were associations that encouraged parents in diasporic locations such as Singapore to enroll their daughters in the dance classes. For many of us, there was no choice in the matter. By the age of 6, we began our journeys as carriers of this culture. The dance form has suitably satisfied the "diasporic demand for cultural symbols" (O'Shea 2007: 55) and continues to do so even today. Anthropologist Sitara Thobani highlights: "It is in the transnational context that essentialized constructions of India are further cemented, leading to the strengthening of ideas regarding coherence, uniformity and impermeability of Indian culture" (2017: 105). In more recent years, with neo-liberalism and the rising presence of the transnational elites in Singapore, who come here with a much stronger connection to India, India's presence is felt more strongly. With the shifting political landscape, there appears to be a growing partnership between India and the diaspora in heightening the projection of Indianness and Hinduness globally.

## Conclusion

Despite its advent as an 'invented tradition'<sup>24</sup>, Bharatanatyam appears now to be locked into a continuing nationalist project. I agree with choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh who says, "It is one thing to say that it has roots that go back two thousand years and quite another to say it hasn't changed over that period of time" (1993: 7). Scholar Kapila Vatsyayan acknowledges that Bharatanatyam deals with modernity as well as with "fragments of antiquity" (1992: 8).

Understanding Bharatanatyam as an invented tradition should offer hope of its potential for reinvention. However my observations and experiences in the field, as I have discussed, foreground hegemonic structures in Bharatanatyam that restrict its scope to nationalist, colonialist and various other agendas specific to each space in which it exists.

I introduce the notion of the Problematic Danseuse, who rejects the prescriptive framework of Bharatanatyam that is governed by rules of purity and appropriateness, choosing instead to explore autonomy and authenticity through the portrayal of her lived feminine. I suggest that the danseuse who contradicts the status quo, especially with regard to the portrayal of eroticism, is treated with contempt and tends to be frozen out. However I also highlight that this act of erasing the Problematic Danseuse who does not fit conveniently into the mainstream agenda is after all, embedded in the history and emergence of the transfigured Bharatanatyam. I propose that creators of alternative works in Bharatanatyam acknowledge that they occupy a different space, thus presenting their work in settings that facilitate the gradual nurturing of an audience base that is willing to engage them critically. I highlight the various hegemonic forces – Indian nationalism that is highly mobile, cultural essentialism, overt emphasis on religiosity and privileging of the male dancer - that conspire to suppress the Problematic Danseuse in various ways.

For the stray dissenters, it can be a lonely battle if not for the solidarity and strength drawn from other “courageous” women in the field – from the past and the present. As Hubel points out vis-à-vis the Devadasi: “At this moment in India, when Hindu fundamentalism works to essentialize women once again, it seems especially crucial to celebrate those who don’t or didn’t fit comfortably into Hindu patriarchy’s coercive narrative” (2005: 138). For the many women born and led into rigid patriarchal structures (in my case Brahminism and Bharatanatyam),

it can be a lifelong battle on multiple fronts to resist the silencing and to speak authentically.

The author wishes to thank Dr. Shobha Avadhani and Dr. Suparna Banerjee for their critical inputs.

### Notes

1. These works have been described in my essay “Challenging Patriarchy Through Dance” (2011) in *In Time Together* [online], edited by Linda Caldwell, Denton: Texas Woman’s University.
2. Dance scholars including Avanthi Meduri (2004) and Janet O’Shea (2007) have written extensively on the globalization of Bharatanatyam.
3. A milkmaid and the favorite consort of the god Krishna, Radha is also believed to be an incarnation of goddess Lakshmi.
4. A male Hindu deity worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and symbolizing romantic and divine love as well as protection.
5. An expressive aspect of the dance that conveys a theme through hand gestures, facial expressions, body postures and mime.
6. A poem depicts the erotic love between Krishna and his lover Radha.
7. This anthology was composed by the 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Jayadeva. It is divided into twelve chapters that are further divided into twenty-four songs of eight lines each called an *ashtapadi*.
8. A Sanskrit term for performance venue.
9. A characteristic position in Odissi (classical dance form that originated in the Indian state of Odisha), Chauka is a symmetrical, deep and low, with legs bent and turned out wide from the hips.

10. See Coorlawala (2004) and Meduri (2005), where the issue of Bharatanatyam and Sanskritization has been extensively discussed.
11. This term is translated as 'servant of god' and refers to female temple dancers who were ceremoniously wedded to the male deity.
12. The era (end of the 19th century until the mid-20th century) that witnessed the anti-nautch movement, abolition of Devadasi practices and the revival of the dance was also that of colonialism leading to post-independence. There is a great amount of writing on this era by scholars including Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Anne Marie Gaston (1996), Avanthi Meduri (1996), Uttara Coorlawala (2004), Janet O'Shea (2007) and Teresa Hubel (2005).
13. See for example Amrit Srinivasan: The Tamil Bhakti tradition of which the Devadasi was an integral part, rejected Puritanism as a valid religious ethic for its female votaries" (1876), Balasaraswati: "There is nothing in Bharatanatyam which can be purified afresh" (1978: 110), Ram Gopal: "Rukmini...has bleached Bharata Natyam...we worship the linga [male sex organ] and the yoni [female sex organ]... How can we deny sex between a man and woman? How can you not feel that erotic drive? It is a charge between human beings." (In Gaston 1996: 94), Chandralekha: "The basic aramandi [half sitting] posture, legs spread eagled with the yoni [vagina] as the centre of the universe, is so elemental, sexual. How can dance be sanitized?" (Mehra 1998).
14. The reform and revival of Bharatanatyam were very much situated in the wider nationalist discourse of reform and revival of the position of women in society. While reformists were aligned with the forces of colonialism and the "European ideals of equality", the revivalists emphasized the importance of "orthodox Indian Hindu culture" (O'Shea 2007: 105). Out of these opposing forces

- emerged the notion the "new respectable lady" (ibid) who would straddle both tradition and modernity. This new image of Indian womanhood percolated into the reconfigured Bharatanatyam.
15. It is a noted arts and cultural institution in Chennai founded in 1926 by Rukmini Devi Arundale.
16. The style of dance that was practiced in the royal court of Thanjavur and known to be fluid and *abhinaya*-focused with a special emphasis on *sringara*.
17. A 17<sup>th</sup> century Telugu poet and Carnatic music composer whose compositions are performed by Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancers.
18. It is a traditional Indian male garment, an unstitched piece of cloth that is tied around the waist and legs.
19. A dance that involves striking small sticks and is linked to the traditional story of Krishna in which he dances with the *gopis* (cowherdresses). The dance is performed in a circle to signify the eternal dance of life.
20. An aspect of the male Hindu deity Shiva who is worshipped as the lord of dance.
21. *Jathi* (a rhythmic metrical sequence) that is performed in three speeds.
22. A rhythmic piece that is generally the opening piece in a Bharatanatyam recital.
23. It refers to Non-Resident Indians.
24. A term coined by historian Eric Hobsbawm to describe: "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically



implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (1995: 1).

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## Embodying Trauma: The Holocaust and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

Saradindu Bhattacharya

### Abstract

This essay examines Art Spiegelman's Holocaust graphic memoir *Maus* as a case study for the representation of trauma through the body of the victim/survivor. I argue that the central visual metaphor of the graphic narrative turns the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor into a multivalent textual sign that encodes as well as subverts the genocidal discourse of racial differentiation, functions as an icon for the experience of extreme human suffering, and serves as a reminder of the humanness of the dehumanized subject of trauma. Additionally, I also analyse the self-reflexive representation of the body of the victim/survivor as a means of recognizing and bearing witness to trauma that is at once personal and collective, as well as of acknowledging the unbridgeable gap between the experience and memory of trauma.

This essay attempts to examine how historical trauma is represented visually through the body of the victim that serves both as a remainder and a reminder of extreme human suffering. I use Art Spiegelman's Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* as my key text and explore the central visual metaphor the author employs (the Nazis as cats/the Jews as mice) for its effectiveness as well as limitations in representing trauma that is, on the one hand, experientially embodied and historically specific, and on the other, culturally dispersed and textually reinscribed. I argue that the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor, so far as it

becomes subject to/of visualization for an audience both historically and culturally removed from the actual experience of trauma, functions as (a) a discursive construct of the racialized Jewish subject, (b) a synecdochic icon of the actual, physical experience of pain, and (c) a textual sign for reasserting the "humanness" of the dehumanized victim. I further demonstrate how Spiegelman's self-reflexive visual narrative strategy enables a form of witnessing in which the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor becomes the means and the site for the recognition of trauma and simultaneously also serves as a marker of the unbridgeable gap between the experience and the memory of trauma.

The centrality of the body as the site of atrocity and trauma is recognized in Holocaust narratives by means of certain representational strategies that highlight the dehumanization of the individual victim and the consequent reduction of his/her identity to mere physical subsistence; yet, the brutalized body is often foregrounded in these texts, both in its material and discursive aspects, to emphasize and reassert the fundamental *human* identity of the dehumanized subject of genocidal violence. The representation of the victim's suffering poses a particular aesthetic and ethical challenge to second generation authors because they are experientially removed from the historical context in which the body was subjected to violence. It is in this context that Art Spiegelman's path-breaking two-volume graphic memoir, *Maus* (1986, 1991) serves as a useful case study for examining how the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor becomes both the subject and the means of accessing and responding to trauma. Spiegelman employs the visual strategy of representing the European Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats, which serves as a narrative principle that offers a point of entry into the process of remembering and representing the trauma of the Holocaust. The cat-and-mouse imagery serves as a visual metaphor that enables Spiegelman to bear witness to his father's "story" as well as to narrativize his own experience of negotiating his subject position

vis-à-vis that story as a second generation Holocaust survivor and author. At the centre of this metaphor is the racialized body, since it is the obvious physical differentiation between the Jews and the Nazis that enables the audience to witness the genocidal persecution of the former by the latter. The concept of the racialized "Other", which constituted the ideological and strategic basis for the Holocaust, can, in fact, be located in the Nazi discourse of identifying the Jews as a sub-human species. The projection of the Jewish people as vermin by the popular German media in the 1930s created a discursive and ideological atmosphere where the logical, "Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem" was the extermination of the entire race. The Jewish people were thus already dehumanized in the collective imagination of the Nazis even before they began the actual work of killing them en masse. This discursive homogenization of an entire group of people across common markers of difference such as age, gender, class and nationality effected a near total effacement of any signs of individual uniqueness that a Jewish person could possibly lay claim to. Thus, Spiegelman sets the historical context of his graphic narrative at the beginning of the first volume of *Maus*, quoting the following statement of Hitler as an epigraph: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human". The anthropomorphized characters of *Maus*, radically transposed from the popular context of comic books to the niche domain of Holocaust art, represent symbolically the process through which the Jews were systemically and discursively "othered" in terms of their (perceived) genetic difference from the pure Aryan race of the Nazi imagination. In representing Jews as mice, Spiegelman literalizes Hitler's racist propaganda and turns the Jewish body into a site upon which the genocidal discourse of the Nazis can be visually transcribed. At the same time, Spiegelman also builds self-reflexive irony into this visual code: he attributes to these animalized bodies an identifiably humanoid form (upright, bipedal posture and movement) and uniquely human

characteristics of speech and behaviour. Thereby, he turns the *maus* body into a visual symbol that encapsulates the discursive construction of the Jewish subject as the racial "Other" as well as points to its unmistakable humanness. In doing so, Spiegelman manages to highlight the barbarity of the Nazi discourse by foregrounding the contrast between the images on the page and the real human beings whose story they tell. As Andreas Huyssen points out, "Spiegelman's mimetic adoption of Nazi imagery actually succeeds in reversing its implications while simultaneously keeping us aware of the humiliation and degradation of that imagery's original intention" (34). The deliberate visual distortion of the body of the victim thus becomes an effective narrative means of alerting the reader to the fact that it was real human bodies that were subjected to dehumanizing violence.

As readers, we recognize the fact that though the narrative traces the experiences of a single individual (Artie's father, Vladek) during the Holocaust, it represents, through the visual homogenization of all Jews as mice persecuted by the Nazi cats, the collective trauma of an entire ethnic group. In fact, Vladek's body is, in a sense, rendered iconic through the visual simplification essential to the form of graphic narrative. In terms of his physical attributes, Vladek is representative of all Jews in the narrative – he is just one of the innumerable mice who are imprisoned and persecuted by the Nazi cats and the physical deprivations he goes through at Auschwitz are experienced by everybody around him. Yet, Spiegelman is careful to remind his readers that Vladek is an actual human being whose experience of trauma, like anybody else's, is essentially embodied and therefore, singular in spite of its commonness with other victims'. Thus, Vladek's body, in all its particular materiality, is rendered iconic through its visualization as a representative mouse-figure on the pages of the books. The material existence of this body is figured visually at various points in the narrative. Towards the very beginning of the first book, we get to see the number tattooed on

Vladek's arm in one of the panels (Figure 1). This unmistakable sign, itself a cultural icon that marks out the body on which it is inscribed as that of a concentration camp survivor, is a visual reminder of the fact that the body represented here is one that has been subjected to genocidal violence. The tattooed arm, in its capacity to identify Vladek as an Auschwitz survivor, bears a synecdochic relation to his individual trauma, but at the same time it also stands as a representative of the collective trauma inflicted upon the European Jewish community during the Holocaust (the number is, after all, only one in a long series, and one of the few whose bearers lived to tell the tale). Notwithstanding his rodent-like facial features, Vladek's body is, as this panel clearly suggests, the physical, human site of trauma that is both personal and collective in nature. The survivor's marked body thus becomes both a literal and a figurative link between the personal suffering of an individual and the larger, communal significance of historical trauma. The tattooed body thus becomes an instantly recognizable mark of identity for the victim/survivor as well as a visual shorthand for the audience for "reading" the story of an individual's suffering within the larger cultural context of bearing witness to the historical trauma of the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>. In dramatic contrast to the dehumanizing scarring of his body, Vladek recalls, in the facing page, how people used to remark that he looked like Rudolf Valentino – the cinematic comparison represented in a panel depicting Vladek on his exercise cycle with an enormous film poster in the background (Spiegelman 17). The inclusion of Vladek's casual reference to his own youthful good looks, described in specific relation to a real-life celebrity, reminds us again of the materiality of his body, of the fact that though the characters on the page are schematic sketches of anthropomorphized mice, they refer back to real human beings. Thus, it is the very artifice of the central visual metaphor of the books that enables rather than impedes the recognition of the animalized body of the victim/survivor as a marker of his humanness.

In fact, Spiegelman is acutely conscious of the limitations of his own visual strategy and occasionally breaks its codes to alert the reader to the reality of the trauma underlying the metaphor. One of the most significant ways in which he achieves this is through the rare but deliberately unsettling use of photographs. Towards the very end of his testimony, Vladek recalls how after being liberated from the camp he had sent Anja a letter and enclosed a photograph of his as proof of his survival (Figure 2). Spiegelman includes this photograph, without any authorial comment, as part of his narrative alongside the cat-and-mouse sketches (Spiegelman 294). At this point in the narrative, the physical form of the body of the Holocaust victim, captured by the camera, breaks the visual code of the animal imagery and becomes a marker of his humanness. The body, as the subject of photographic representation, serves as an obvious reminder of the fact that the visual imagery is just a symbolic means of accessing and narrativizing the memories of real people, that beneath the mouse face lies a human being who survived the Holocaust. Significantly, the body we see in the photograph does not bear any obvious signs of physical suffering: the human subject here is *not* a starving, incarcerated camp inmate but a survivor who is no longer exposed to the mortal, dehumanizing suffering of the Holocaust. Vladek's identity as an Auschwitz survivor is figured here prosthetically in the clothes that he wears; he becomes identifiable as a victim by willingly offering his body, post-Holocaust, for visualization in a way that can only mimic the real suffering it has endured. The body of the victim/survivor thus becomes a performative "sign" that bears the memory of trauma beyond the immediate conditions of suffering. The photograph is, therefore, the result of a staged act, one that recalls, through the iconic striped uniform (much like the tattooed arm), the suffering its subject had undergone at Auschwitz, but at the same time also points to its own theatricality by inviting both the victim and the spectator (through the eye of the camera and subsequently the editorial

intervention of Spiegelman) to participate in what is essentially a *belated* witnessing of trauma.

The photograph, or more precisely, the scanned image of the photograph (already at a remove from the "original" document), is positioned differently from the other illustrations on the page and elsewhere in the book, diagonally superimposed over a darkened empty panel, suggesting that it cannot be neatly contained within the visual field that the other boxed drawings offer. This counterposing of the photographic image against the predominant visual code of the narrative draws attention to the human subject at the centre of such representational strategies by using the body of the Holocaust victim as an evidential tool. Thus, the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor functions both as the subject and the site of contesting representational modes that point only to the inadequacy of any single visual strategy to fully capture the trauma of the Holocaust. What the photograph offers here is not documentary proof captured from a moment in European history of the atrocities perpetrated on Vladek and millions of others like him; rather, it is the absence of such an "original" referent that the photograph highlights<sup>ii</sup>. Thus, the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor turns into a visual icon that suggests rather than captures the extreme human suffering and loss caused by the Holocaust.

If Spiegelman employs the body as a visual sign for representing the trauma of the Holocaust victim/survivor, he also explores its potential to comment upon his own subject position as a second generation author vis-à-vis the inherited memory of that trauma. Thus, at the beginning of the second volume of *Maus*, Spiegelman takes a narrative detour to reflect upon his own sense of guilt, inadequacy and depression following the critical and commercial success of the first volume. Spiegelman offers a visual explanation for his feelings by portraying himself sitting at his desk over a heap of naked dead bodies with flies buzzing all

around (Figure 3). This image instantly recalls concentration camp photographs of the heaped corpses of hundreds of Jews about to be burned or buried. By thus using an iconic image that has immediate resonance in the context of the popular representation of the Holocaust, Spiegelman seems to suggest that the text exists in a parasitical relationship with those who are dead and therefore incapable of speaking for themselves. The bodies of the dead that constitute (literally) the foundation of the narrative thus become a visual symbol of the second generation survivor's guilt. It is significant to note that in this and the next few pages (201-07), where he directly confronts the issue of how the Holocaust and its aftermath has affected his own life and work, Spiegelman represents himself as a human wearing a mouse mask on his face instead of the anthropoid mouse figure he uses in the rest of the narrative, thereby indicating that his identification with the victims of the Holocaust can only be partial and tenuous. It is the body of the second generation author that becomes an imperfect tool for Artie, the narrator, to appropriate his Jewish identity for the purpose of narrativizing the inherited trauma of the Holocaust. The masked body thus functions here as a visual device for signifying the experiential gap between someone (like Vladek) who has actually lived through the traumatic experience of the Holocaust and someone (like Artie) who has only inherited it as familial memory, as well as for representing the emotional and ethical quandary the latter faces in attempting to tell the former's story. In a brilliantly ironic move, Spiegelman represents his escalating sense of helplessness in the face of the naive questions and inane offers from media-persons by portraying himself as a bawling kid asking for his mother. The infantilized body thus becomes a visual metaphor for Spiegelman's artistic and ethical qualms in coming to terms with his literary success, which he recognizes as being consequent upon the narrativization of trauma that is not properly his own. Spiegelman's engagement with the inherited nature of trauma and the problems it poses for representation by a second generation survivor are thus

foregrounded, in typical self-reflexive, postmodern fashion, through the use of the body as a means of affiliation to the memory of the Holocaust as well as a marker of the crucial difference between the experience and the remembrance of it.

In conclusion, the body of the Holocaust victim/survivor in *Maus* serves not only as the subject of the visual representation of trauma but also as a multivalent textual sign that enables such representation. As a discursive construct and an iconic marker of genocidal violence, the body becomes, for both the second generation author and his audience, the site and the means of a paradoxical recognition of the *human* subject at the centre of the dehumanizing experience of trauma. Thus, the graphic narrativization of trauma through the central category of the body constitutes a form of witnessing wherein we come to identify the victim/survivor as human while simultaneously recognizing the difference between the memory and the experience of the Holocaust.

### Notes

- i. The *New York Times* reported in an article on 30 September, 2012 that a few second and third generation descendants of Auschwitz survivors have tattooed the numbers of their parents and grandparents on their forearms as a "sign" of their traumatic legacy. While such physical appropriation of the sign of trauma by those who have not experienced the Holocaust directly raises questions of legitimacy, it also points to the iconicity of the marked body within the context of Holocaust remembrance. In fact, it is useful to observe here that though the practice of tattooing numbers onto the arms of prisoners was specific only to Auschwitz and Birkenau, the tattooed arm has acquired, through repeated representation across media, a degree of visibility and recognizability that makes it (like other visual signs such as the Star of David and the Nazi swastika) a cultural icon of the Holocaust. If we consider the body of the camp survivor to be a material remainder/reminder of the Holocaust,

the replication of the sign of his/her trauma by their descendants marks a movement from "lived memory to historical memory". As the last survivors of the Holocaust die, there arises a cultural demand for modes of remembrance of their traumatic past that do not rely on direct testimonial evidence. By literally (re)inscribing the sign of dehumanizing atrocity upon his/her own body, the second/third generation survivor turns his/her inherited familial memory of trauma into a larger, collective memory of the Holocaust. The tattoo becomes a code of both remembrance and warning – an iconic visual link between the traumatic past of their ancestors and the dangers of genocide in their present and future. The body is thus employed as a "text" that marks the continuity/continuum of traumatic memory and functions as a transgenerational link between personal and collective history of the Holocaust. ("Proudly Bearing Elders' Scars, Their Skin Says 'Never Forget'" <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/middleeast/with-tattoos-young-israelis-bear-holocaust-scars-of-relatives.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&smid=fb-share&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/middleeast/with-tattoos-young-israelis-bear-holocaust-scars-of-relatives.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&smid=fb-share&)> Accessed on October 28, 2017)

- ii. In her study of the use of photographs in the popular British and American press soon after the liberation of the camps at the end of the Second World War, Barbie Zelizer offers an instance of how images of Nazi atrocities served more as subjects of collective witnessing rather than means of factual representation. She observes that photographs from the camps were circulated quickly and increasingly, sometimes even interchangeably, without reference to their specific spatial or temporal location: "An individual photo's status as evidence mattered less than the ability to simply document what the Nazis had done. Photography thereby provided a collective body of visual documentation that facilitated the act of bearing witness to Nazi brutality..." (94).

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Figure 1



Figure 2



from p.41of Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*, book 2: *And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

Figure 3



## **Violence and Female Bodies: A Literary and Historical Analysis of the Institutionalized Culture of Sexual Violence in the Post Partition Kashmir.**

**Sruthi B Guptha**

### **Abstract**

In the context of India and Pakistan, Partition literature is usually considered and investigated for its political intricacies, disputes and forced displacement and migration of people across boundaries. Saadat Hassan Manto's short stories have always been productive sites of investigation in looking at the traumatic condition of women affected by the terrors of partition across borders. When it comes to the situation of chaos, violence is being inflicted upon women's bodies. 'Sexual violence' has become a weapon. This paper mainly looks at how women's bodies have become sites of violence, politics and resistance, hence making body a productive site of political enquiry. Sandwiched amid the patriarchal structures and the State, 'sexual violence' is used as a weapon of war on female bodies. Such violence has reached far beyond mere physical bodies leaving a traumatic psychological state of mind where concepts like dignity and sense of honour are being imposed upon women by the patriarchal structures of morality. When such a violation of private space and integrity of an individual through sexual abuse is normalized, women's body is considered a site of exploitation to exert control over it. Saadat Hassan Manto's stories like '*Khol Do*' and '*Thanda Gosht*' clearly depicts the post-partition violence and its impact upon female bodies and psyche. Starting off with the representation of female bodies in the works of

Manto, the later emergence of the trend of women breaking the silence in talking about the sexual violence that happened in the context of the partition can be seen as a movement of resistance in reclaiming violated spaces throughout history. Such narratives were never given space in mainstream historiography. The paper also deals with the testimonies and memoirs of women on this account. The performative politics in the recently emerged movements of collective resistance like public sit-ins — how female bodies became theatrical sites of resistance, resurgence and violence in a public space during protests against mass abduction of the common people — is also discussed. It is very relevant to discuss the aspect of performative politics in attempting to stay 'safe' on the one hand and also to project a movement of collective resistance in public spaces by women in Kashmir in condemning and protesting against the mass violence and abduction which is still in progress.

"Sexual violence is rooted in history and culture and encompasses actions that are structural, collective and individual".

Veena Das

We live in a world where systemic violence propagates different forms of violence, of which sexual violence has turned out to be a very serious concern which needs to be discussed and addressed. This form of violence has got its deep history in our own culture. The partition of India and Pakistan marks a very dark period in the history of India because of the mass sexual violence committed upon women. This paper attempts to read that sexual violence, delving into various literary and historical aspects centered on the discourse on 'female body'.

Saadat Hassan Manto is one of the famous short story writers to write on the eventful history of the partition of India and Pakistan. Manto's works speak directly to a set of readers because they dared to

portray the turmoil which the mainstream historiography chose to forget due to its selective amnesia. His works are considered as a realistic representation of the victimization of women during the partition. In a way, Manto's narratives problematize the inefficiency of the historiographic and socio-anthropological frames in not being able to accommodate the experiences of women. In literary analysis, it is however inevitable to consider his narrative as a representation, however realistic it claims to be. When Manto as a male writer tries to present the narrative to the readers through the angle he sees it, what Brinda Silver puts it is the "ambivalence of the male texts of female rape" especially how the violent part of it remains under investigation or caution.

It is pertinent to position the stories inside the larger nationalistic narrative, which is extremely patriotic. Manto is not a writer who identifies himself with the mainstream dominant majoritarian nationalist agenda. When we contextualize his narratives within the dominant patriarchal conception of nation as an image of women during that time, the tendency to show the chaotic condition of the nation through the image of the victimized body of women is relevant in this case. Female bodies are being made the site of investigation as well. As scholars like Harveen Mann argues, the sexually exploited women in Manto's stories are positioned in a patriarchal nationalist narrative which signifies the socio-political violations which happened during the partition. In such narratives, women are denied their agency, their own roles of resistance and the very voice they possess. Contesting the agency of women leads to the refusal of their capability of Self-definition, self-direction, self-presentation and self-identification.

Sexual violence against women is not an act or practice which has to be seen in isolation. The ideological, cultural, political roots of violence on female bodies need to be considered and analyzed in depth. It is about the essentialist perception of the identity of an individual

wherein the identity of a female who has undergone sexual violence becomes a newly recognized one making her a representative of the 'group' ascribing the collective identity to her. This newly recognized identity locates her as a sexual property which has undergone violation. Other concerns of her life are blurred, reducing the female body to a site of interrogation and discussion, turning a blind eye towards other experiences. In Manto's stories like *Khol Do*, the subjectivity is being given to the physique of the female character. It is evident to note the reaction of the character Sakina when she heard the words 'open up'. She responded to those words through a physical gesture which can be considered as a result of her psychological trauma as a consequence of the sexual violence perpetrated upon her body. Here, the body becomes a signifier. It is not a first person narrative of the experience. When female characters are made to voice themselves merely through physical gestures that too in the aftermath of the consecutive sexual violence, their self and subjectivity is reduced to 'bodies' in textual structures which are patriarchal. Challenging the theories of sexual violence framed by scholars like Said, Fanon and Mannoni, It is important for the 21<sup>st</sup> century gender studies to move beyond the binaries of perpetrator and victim in literary-historical narratives and discourses. As Higgins and Silver observe, "rape and rapability are central to the very construction of gender identity and . . . our subjectivity and sense of ourselves as sexual beings are inextricably enmeshed in representations" ( 3).

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their "Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition" note that a Sikh woman named Taran who has come to terms with the dislocation, tensions and violence in the aftermath of partition voiced her opinion that "If women wrote history, men would realise how important peace is" (230). The mainstream historiographers haven't paid attention to the violence that women had to undergo. The archival sources and historical documents are not

gender sensitive in their attempt to erase a very important human rights violation and violence towards women during partition.

Women were othered both in terms of their gender identity and the communal identity by the men of their own communities and also other communities. In Manto's '*Thanda Ghost*', the Sikh man confesses that while looting he killed a family of five Muslims and raped the only woman (whom he later found out as dead) found in that house. It is just one lens of the terror. As Menon and Bhasin discuss, during partition, Hindu and Muslim men not only violated, abducted and exchanged women of other communities but also of their own community. In numerical terms as noted by Bede Scott, "During the 1947 partition of India, an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted by the members of other religious communities to be raped and murdered, sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage (35).

The ideological and cultural readings of sexual violence throw light on the patriarchal constructions of honour, chastity, purity, and pollution around female bodies. Women's bodies were symbolically mutilated in order to show the fragmentation of nation during partition. The disorder of partition was implied through women's bodies. "There were various methods of humiliation such as breasts and noses were cut off, their bodies branded or tattooed with signs and symbols of 'other religion', pregnant were forcibly aborted and often women were made to strip naked and paraded through the streets in towns and cities" (Butalia, 1993, 15).

Many individual and mass suicides were reported during the partition. There are instances where women chose to commit suicide to escape from the kinds of violence and the consequences of the violence. There were also instances where both men and women of the family persuaded women and children to commit suicide to resist abduction and sexual violence at the hands of 'Other' men. In this

context, the words of the 'great' nationalist and freedom fighter, the "Mahatma", requires attention:

I have heard that many women did not want to lose their honour and chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think it is really great because I know that such things make India brave. After all, life and death is a transitory game. Whoever might have died and are dead and gone; but at least they have gone with courage. They have not sold away their honour. Not that their lives were not dear to them, but they felt it was better to die with courage rather than be forcibly converted to Islam by Muslims and allow them to assault their bodies. And so these women died. They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things, I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India. (Gandhi, Speech at Prayer Meeting, quoted in Didur 3)

Gandhi's words which appreciate honour killings carry the legacy of the cultural nationalism which was at its peak then. Suggesting and appreciating suicide over the losing of honour at the hands of the Muslim "other", it makes clear that a woman's life has more to do with her female body which not only carries blood and bones but also honour. The relationship between national or community identity and the female body is intricate and intertwined. The self-proclaimed personalities who are believed to have given utmost important to freedom, the personalities who lead the whole country through the struggle to achieve freedom, don't seem to respect and acknowledge the freedom of women which is one of the important basic rights. It becomes increasingly problematic when the female body symbolizes the purity of a nation which leads to the justification of honour killing on one hand and the sexual violence by the "Other" on the other hand.

In the aftermath of partition, women's bodies suffer in the hands of abductors as well as the men of recovery mission<sup>1</sup> by the state. Physical violence is used as a political weapon by the state as well as by people both collectively and individually. As Foucault argues, the operation of the mechanism of power becomes successfully only after it is implied on the bodies of individuals. He considers the human bodies as spaces where hierarchies are reinforced and inscribed<sup>ii</sup>. The very politics behind the recovery mission itself is ideological and hypocritical. In the gendered nationalistic narrative, the honour of the nation was imposed upon the female bodies. It was not just about the honour of the woman but also about the honour of the specific ethnic group and also about the honour of the nation at times, by when the term "nation" denoting India and Pakistan had communal affiliations of being a Hindu Nation and Muslim Nation respectively. The very idea and the pictorial representation of Bharat Mata is a cultural evidence for the feminization of the nation. Recently, the uproar against the picture of the molested Bharat Mata circulated widely in social media in the context of recurring violence against female bodies convey the sense of hypocritical morality within that ideology. Having made Bharat Mata, the female figure, the ideal cultural icon of India, the female body carries the weight of the conventional morality and ethnicity with it. The very famous Recovery Mission initiated by both the governments in the aftermath of partition aimed at recovering the abducted women and children. Ideologically, through recovering women, they were recovering the lost or abducted honour of the country. It is of no great wonder that Menon and Bhasin declared the State as the abductor in the recovery mission of the abducted women as women's rights as citizens were flung in air under the pretext of protecting the legitimacy and purity of institutions like nation, family, community etc. The irony lays in the treatment of these abducted women by the state and society. The society to which the abducted women are expected to be recovered and rehabilitated is in the clutches of the ideology of honour and morality. The abducted women

who were "polluted" at the hands of 'Other' men are never given a choice of coming to mainstream society and public space. Their very bodies determined their identity in the world's largest democracy. Gender identities and women's bodies become symbolic and spatial boundaries of the nation. Women's bodies serve as symbols of fecundity of the nation and as vessels for its reproduction, as well as territorial markers. (Ivekovic and Mostov, 10) In this context, Foucault's argument that the principal target of power is the body stands material.

Violence committed upon women's bodies is put forth in a metaphorical manner in literary works for various reasons. In real-life narratives like memoirs, the violence embedded on women's bodies is put forth in a raw fashion devoid of any linguistic and literary techniques. As Anis Kidwai recalls in her memoir, "The volunteers told me of many, many women who had had "Pakistan Zindabad" tattooed on their foreheads and the names of numerous rapists cut into their arms and breasts.... Hundreds of Muslim girls were also brought to me, on whose arms hoodlums had tattooed their names and even the date of their crimes" (216). The slogans and other inscriptions on the bodies of women as a revenge on the "other" nation/ community and a response towards partition makes the bodies of women a possession to be ill-treated and claimed. It makes the woman's body as a site through which men communicated. The cutting of breasts and the private parts of the female body can be symbolically read as an attempt to destroy the ability of women to bear and nurture offsprings. In that context, it is important because the so-called "capability of reproduction" determined the life and existence of a woman in the society. The violence was similar on both sides of the border as Kidwai notes, "so similar that at times we were compelled to think that someone else had planned the whole scheme, made two copies of it and handed one over to each side" (2004, 142). In another account, Khan notes that "Women refugees told us that two men would get hold of their legs, open them up and with

a kirpan they...Oh God...they cut the private parts as if they chopped off a piece of baked meat. This was the condition" (ibid, 112).

The cultural taboos that are very deep-rooted in the society made it even more difficult for women to cope psychologically with the physical violence. Whenever there is a question of communal violence, the category of people to be targeted first were women. In targeting women, the gender considered as vulnerable, the sexuality of women was regulated through violence on their bodies. "Gendered and sexualized violence is structured through normative constructions of masculinity and femininity, buttressed by the naturalization of sex, gender and gender binaries. Within this narrative women's body is considered as weak thus vulnerable, dangerous thus regulated"(Nestle, Howell, &Wilchins, 2002).

In the interviews/conversations by scholars and activists like Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, Devika Chawla, Veena Das (as a part of documenting the women's experiences) with the women who had to undergo sexual violence and abduction during partition, it can be observed that most of the women were not ready to talk about their experiences openly. A survivor told Veena Das, "What is there to be proud in a woman's body? Every day it is polluted by being consumed" (85). Most importantly, it is also about a woman's perception of one's own body while looking at oneself through the framework created by patriarchy.

The relationship of body, memory and language are important in the discussion of sexual violence against women. Foucault observes, "Memory is a very important factor in struggle. If one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism, experiences and their knowledge of previous struggles" (22). According to this, memory is considered as a form of resistance. I find it a generalization related to the capability of

human beings to memorize events either in chronological order or in a fragmented order. Memory becomes a choice to carry life forward when remembering certain events is traumatic. The violation in the level of thoughts and in the level of the body has varied impact on the memory. As the response of women to conversations and interviews convey, they don't wish to recollect forgotten events; a "selective amnesia" is at work there. In such contexts, the transactions between body, memory and language get complicated. The non-expressibility of violence, pain and trauma through language can have different reasons behind it. It can either be the inadequacy of language or the detachment from the "ordinariness of language". The latter reason can be read in the representation of Sakina in Manto's "*Khol Do*". As a survivor of sexual violence, her fragmented relation to the ordinary language made her open her legs instead of opening the window. Language is always related to the experiences of people. It is the reason why Sakina's father read her gesture as the form of life present in her and he exclaims, "She is alive".

Beyond the history of representations in literary, political and cultural discourses, the recovery mission of the state, the emancipatory forms of resistance that the women of Kashmir have come up with in the context of the mass abduction of their people by the representatives of the state adds a new dimension to the discourse on body culture. It is a practice of political quest in which women come together in public spaces with the photographs of people abducted along with informal practices of grief. Often they sing lullabies for the missing sons and daughters.<sup>iii</sup> As noted by Freny Manecksha "It is, in truth, 'performative politics' — Kashmiri mothers using their bodies as a theatrical site at monthly sit-ins" (86). Here women make use of their body and conventional identities in very creative ways to protest, also subverting the identity of a mother as a curator of private identity. It also produces

a kind of counter comprehension to the form of violence done by the state.

Coming to the ongoing discourse on sexual violence against women, as Nivedita Menon points out in "The Conundrum of Agency", the patriarchal narratives consider it as an act of violence which has cultural implications far beyond the violation of the integrity of the body. On the other hand, the stance of gender-sensitive narratives like that of feminists consider it as a kind of physical violence which is humiliating both physically and mentally. The binary that exists in such an understanding of sexual violence nullifies the spaces of productive discourses around the gendered construction of "sex" and "sexuality", which is very important in understanding "sexual violence". It has to be discussed in the framework of non-heterosexual, alternative masculinities and femininities. The identity of the women who undergo violence is also important for the intersectional aspects such as caste, religious, cultural affiliations.

### Notes

- i. For a critical reading of the recovery operation, refer to "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition" by Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin
- ii. For an elaborate understanding of Foucault's argument, refer to Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History" (1977)
- iii. For more information, refer Frency Manecksha's 'Behold I Shine: Narratives of Kashmir's Women and Children', in Deepti Misri, *Beyond Partition: Gender Violence and Representation in Post Colonial India*. 2014.

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## Writing the Body: Women's Travelogues and Menstruation

Sangeetha Damodaran

### Abstract

When one travels, both the psychological and physiological factors of the traveller are expected to go hand in hand to create a unique travel experience. Travel, when viewed as an activity, requires a certain amount of the traveller's bodily inputs. The physiological factor of the traveller thus attains importance while on travel. For that reason, the narrative on the particular activity seemingly requires a certain amount of the writer's embodied self. In that case, body's especially the biological inimitableness of the female body becomes crucial for it supplements the narratorial complacency of a travelogue authored by a woman. In other words, the inborn and attributed peculiarities of the female body thus become one of the major factors which seemingly ought to define the experience of a woman's travel. Though there can be exceptions, women's narratives on travel generally do not address menstruation, a biological peculiarity of the female body. The menstrual body is quite often omitted from their detailings of everyday life while on travel. Women may have their own reasons for the omission of this fundamental female matter from their narratives on travel. This paper tries to problematize the omission of this particular peculiarity of the female body from the travelogues written by Malayalee women.

Using the umbrella term 'Women's Travelogues' we claim universality with regard to gender. But it is difficult to homogenise all the

diverse travel experiences of women within a single paradigm. The social conditions during the time of travel and their own socio economic and political positioning determine the experience of women's travel. More than any other difference, it is the inborn and attributed peculiarities of the female body which determine the nature and experience of women's travel. Thus body becomes an undeniable factor in defining woman's travel. So apart from the socio-cultural and economic positioning, women's narratives on travel ought to be different in the sense that it is expected to have affected by physiological and biological peculiarities of their gender. Emily Falconer in her article "Telling Tales: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Travel Narratives" (2009) observes that it is through women's travel writings we achieve a greater understanding of the socialized position of gender. Even though women seem to challenge the traditional notions of space, gaze and mobility through their narratives of travel: they generally tend to omit certain peculiarities with regard to their own body in their writings. It is understood that women opt for too many internal censorings in their narration to make their experience acceptable to the reading public.

In a general sense, especially in India, the travels of women between an age group of puberty and middle age are largely affected, controlled or even blocked by various socio cultural and religious beliefs and notions. Whatever be the situations, women do travel a lot for a number of particular reasons, but a travel for her own sake is still not very much appreciated just like her other purposeful travels. But what is to be noted here is that, even the travel narratives of these women, who have challenged all the bodily and social restrictions with regard to mobility, do fail to include their unique experience which is entirely related to femininity. Though there can be exceptions, it is a fact that generally, women tend to omit or keep a safe distance away from mentioning or addressing the female bodily matter, i.e. menstruation which makes a female travel experience unique. This paper tries to analyse the various



socio cultural, political and ideological reasons behind the "omission" of a fundamental female matter- menstruation from the travelogues written by Indian women.

Whatever be the differences within women's travel, the bodily factor, menstruation, i.e., the periodic shedding of the endometrium (the lining of the uterus) and blood through cervix and out of the body through vagina is a biological process which is quite natural and common to young girls and women who belong to a particular age group, depending upon their physiological, genetic and hormonal conditions. Unless prevented with medicines, pregnancy, hormonal changes, menopause or any other illness or any bodily peculiarities, this particular phenomenon is unchangeable and universal for young girls and women who belong to this particular age group. Though there can be exceptions, generally, this biological process which can even determine or affect a woman's travel is most often left unmentioned or unaddressed in travel narratives written by women. This doesn't mean that all women who write on travel need to mention their bodily process or matters related to menstruation. But the point is, if they enjoy detailing their everyday life on a long distance or a long period travel why do they hesitate to mention anything related to their monthly periods in their narratives. In a general sense, this 'omission' can be viewed as a reflection of the socio cultural attitude kept towards menstruation. In the introduction to *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing*, Shirley Foster and Sara Mills make it clear that the most intimate details associated with women's travel have been omitted "(how for example did they cope with menstruation?)"(9). While the whole aim of this anthology is to challenge the stereotypes of women travelers, the editors Foster and Mills makes it clear that "there is usually some reference to the difficulties faced by a woman traveler in an essentially male world," (9) and that they point out in the *Notes* given for the introduction to the anthology that "menstruation is an issue which current travel writers have begun to

address" (12). All these indirectly hint towards the fact that this bodily issue is something which is powerful and important that it is capable of killing the whole spirit of a travel and its narrative.

The question which needs to be discussed here is, why women are forced to remain silent about this fundamental female issue or rather what is the politics behind this act of silencing any discussions on menstrual issues in their travel books which belong to public spaces. Though there can be exceptions, this silence points towards the taboos associated and practiced in connection with menstruation in almost every society in the world. Rita E. Montgomery, in her article, "Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables" observes that the taboos with regard to menstruation are transcultural in nature that the restrictions are not at all universal that some societies are completely casual about menstruation and the related taboos.

The collective embarrassment of women due to the bleeding process can be read in connection with the Victorian moralities that had occupied and are still prevailing within the dominant patriarchal societies. These moralities have made menstruation and its bleeding process as something which should not be talked about. This might be the reason why menstruation is always associated or looked upon with shame. While maternity and motherhood are considered sacred and celebrated in among the multi- facet Indian society, the religious and cultural taboos associated with the natural physiological functioning- menstruation, the primary thing which denotes the fertility of a woman are at the same time hilarious and annoying. Women themselves have internalized these norms that most of them wish to go along with the tradition. Very rarely women tend to question these ages old traditions.

Betty Frieden, in her much acclaimed book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) observes that women's bodily and psychological issues and the difficulties with regard to menstruation are all issues that are to

be taken for granted that this too should go along with her other 'problems that has no name' (32). Women deliberately omit this particular bodily process due to their social conditioning that menstrual issues are not at all issues or matters which need to be talked about in a public space.

If the writer is a woman and if she is writing on a lengthy travel of days and months, it is definitely a crucial matter which needs to be addressed. If we look for the reasons, generally, a woman's travel is decided according to or based on her monthly periods. This argument is not always applicable in every case for it depends on the class, caste and age group of the woman who travels. For this, the travels of women need to be classified as travels of privileged and those under privileged women. The privileged woman is much freer to schedule and reschedule her travel times according to her monthly periods. This is not at all possible if she is a very responsible officer or if she has to fulfill some urgent travel requirements. But she is more privileged than the under privileged woman who doesn't have much choice in deciding upon her travels. The under privileged worker woman in India who travels from one state to another for her work purposes has to go through all such unhygienic, unsanitary conditions and the problem gets worse if she is on her periods while traveling, without changing sanitary pads most of the time. She is not privileged enough to get or buy a sanitary pad while on travel. Buying sanitary pads is not at all affordable to the under privileged poor women. Many use rags, ashes, straw or even sand or mud as absorbents. In fact, the problems connected with their 'not to be spoken out' difficulties are endless. So these unrecorded travels of the working class women do need special mention while discussing women's travels. The travels of the underprivileged worker women in no way can be compared to the travels of the privileged upper class women, for they are largely differentiated. The privileged upper class women like top level government officials, civil servants, academicians, high salaried IT professionals, business women can travel either in their own vehicle or enjoy the facilities in flight or in train depending upon the

distance and time of travel. If they are in their monthly periods, they are privileged enough to make use of the facilities provided for them, i.e. they can get, change and dispose their sanitary pads within the required time periods. They can also take medicines to overcome their bodily difficulties due to menstruation. But another privileged class does have problems dealing with the changing and disposal of sanitary pads, for even the top institutions which claim of high quality facilities do fail to provide such amenities. Public toilets and comfort stations are not at all women friendly. Furthermore, not all will be free of allergies even if they are using a quality branded sanitary napkin. Sanitary pad can act as a silent killer if not removed within the required time limit. Poor menstrual hygiene can cause reproductive tract infections which may lead to cervical cancer. But comparatively, the condition of privileged women is much better than that of the under privileged working class women. But one thing is for sure that except for a very few, whichever group the women may belong, those who are in their fertile periods will have to cope with their own pre-menstrual symptoms, for each woman's body is different in their /her own way. She may have to deal with various kinds of sicknesses like severe abdominal cramps, head-ache, back pain, vomiting, dizziness, and above all she and those others who are around her too have to cope with her mood swings, which even she herself has no control over. So, if the menstruating woman is on travel, her experience about that particular travel will in every way be different from a travel made on her 'normal' day. Her writing too will get affected due to her personal disturbing conditions. The women who undergo symptoms of menopause or those on menopause are also likely to experience yet another different set of bodily issues. Due to the hormonal imbalances they have to cope with various bodily issues like their own body heat, excess sweat, high blood pressure, insomnia, obesity, depression, short temper and other psychological problems due to the changes happening in their body. It can be understood that, on the whole, travels of women are hugely affected by their biological issues. A woman who has ever experienced any of these menstrual or menopause issues

can never ever take this matter lightly. It is a fact that pre-menstrual, menstrual and menopause symptoms and issues are something which actually controls the self of a woman. So if a woman keeps mum on her biological cycle while writing a narrative on a long distance or a long period travel it is that she sure in her deep heart, is confined with the taboos and rituals associated with menstruation. Or else she might be omitting this under the notion that menstruation is something that one must be ashamed of. K. A Beena, the Malayalee travel writer observes that travels are difficult experiences during menstruation. She says:

Menstruation is the main reason that place women on the back stages. ... It is a fact that society is not at all serious about addressing problems suffered by women. ... What is being contradictory is that, women themselves are too ardent to follow the rituals and taboos associated with menstruation. ... Menstruation is the main issue which makes it impossible for women to take up travels. ... Not only during the menstrual periods even in normal days too travels are quite impossible for women because, toilets are unimaginable in the rural villages in India. (*Deshabhimani Weekly* 2014)

In Sujatha Devi's travel narrative *Kaadukalute Thalam Thedi* (1998), she describes her survival in the daring cold climate in the Himalayas. While she seems comfortable to discuss her bodily issues coping with the harsh climatic conditions and raw atmosphere where one cannot expect a toilet or a bathroom, one could assume that she had deliberately omitted her certain bodily issues related to a woman's menstrual cycle. She describes her search for a better hiding place to answer her call of nature,

"... I walked nearly two furlongs in the heavy rain and storm in search of a better place to hide, in fact, toilets and bathrooms are not necessities in this particular geographical area." "... now that my stomach had stopped working. ... Infection in my chest

and head, small suffocation, throat pain, headache, problems due to arthritis in my knees and other joints, my tummy is upset. How is it possible for me to climb the peaks with all these problems?" (34- 5).

The point to be noted here is that, unless prevented with medicines or menopause, she being a woman of forty five can be expected to have a menstrual cycle which definitely might have disturbed her in her forty five days of travel. It should be noted that while she dared to discuss her other bodily issues she had deliberately omitted her fundamental female matter.

In almost every travel guide book 'how to deal with your menstrual issues while on travel' is quite a common topic seen along with other topics and tips like 'dealing with climatic conditions to using toilets etc.' This clearly indicates that these are important issues to be dealt with while away from one's comfort zone.

Noted Indian solo traveler and writer Anjali Thomas remarks in her travel book *Almost Intrepid* (2013) that along with the usual questions like "Aren't I scared of being raped? Robbed? Mugged?" (11) or "Do you sleep alone in hotels" (11) she also get questions about her female issues; "How do I cope with my female issues, from dealing with periods to washing underwear?" (11). But for this, her reply is vague and that she doesn't feel like answering it as though she was interrogated by an unwanted silly question. Though the fundamental aspect of her female experience has been left untouched, with her descriptions and her beautifully placed photographs in the book one could make out the easiness with which she handles/ carries her female body all over the world from the cold Kilimanjaros to the pyramids of Egypt which is quite appreciable and commendable. But at the same time she leaves volumes unanswered in an urge to "cope with the dominant discourses on travel" thereby making the book go along with the "Master Scripts"

(Falconer). So the experience of her biological process which is definitely out of the "major script" of her travel narrative has to be considered as another "omitted narrative" (Falconer).

Since travels are viewed as segments from a person's life, the travel narratives written by men which may contain pure male matters or description of their sexual encounters while away from home, help add more glamour and heroism to their life and to their writings as well. At a time when there were hardly any readers for the travel narratives written by women, in the introduction of her book, *Gender, Genre and Identity in Women's Travel Writing* (2004), Kristi Siegel notes that in order to keep audience a woman writer is expected to provide material that was reasonably exciting to the readers while maintaining her identity as a woman and also she is expected not to compete with men's writing in any dimension.

So it is understood that, the double stranded attitude of the society towards femininity prevents women from discussing matters connected to their life in their travel narratives which are of course life writings too. But we have to admit the fact that there are a few women who were bold enough to cross the limits of their own constructed boundaries in their travel writings. Anjali Thomas is one such travel writer. But it should be noted that even these women writers who were courageous enough to cross the limits of their culture too failed to address the fundamental feminine matter in their narratives of travel.

In her travel narrative, *Almost Intrepid*, Anjali Thomas narrates an incident that happened in one of her travels. It was almost like an assault happened in a hotel equipped with a minibar in Cambodia. She narrates, "drinks and joints were being passed around, and a tall, dirty man with glazed eyes was dragging me into the melee. What happened after is left to the imagination. ... But the receptionist had been right. Cambodia did have the "best stuff" (150). This kind of openness is

something unusual from a woman of Indian origin. What is to be noted here is that even a woman who is bold enough to narrate an incident like this neglects to address the most fundamental matter associated uniquely with femininity. In the same book, she also gives explanations on a few myths associated with women's travels by giving examples and in the light of her own experiences on solo travel. She breaks one such popular travel advice which may sound almost mythical, i.e., "never have sex with strangers" (207), for which she says "Heard of condoms? They are meant to be used" (207). Here, being a solo woman traveler from India her statement sounds bold as well as heroic, because India is a country where the dominant patriarchal culture considers and expects virginity and chastity as qualities that are highly valued and looked upon from a woman. Both culturally and socially, the biological process, menstruation, has always been associated with shame, so that might be the reason why she had deliberately omitted her biological cycles in her narrative. But in any way it is hard to believe that a woman like Anjali Thomas who, tries to be or otherwise is different will in any way, whether it be shame, social stigma or cultural taboo, leave such an issue like menstruation unmentioned.

Unlike men, women's individuality or liberty or sexual freedom, is very much defined by their familial and societal roles and duties. In other words, they are very much under the surveillance of familial power which is generally patriarchal in nature. The point to be noted here is that, the fundamental female bodily matter, menstruation, is always read along with sexuality. The rigid patriarchal society is not at all approving towards women to discuss sexuality, so women prefer to keep quiet on menstruation under the notion that menstruation is something which is associated with sexuality. So in general, society's intolerance towards female sexuality actually prevents women from addressing their most fundamental bodily matters in their narratives on travel.

Noted Indian English writer and traveler Anita Nair narrates an incident that happened in Maldives in her travel book *Koo Koo Koo Koo Theevandi*. She narrates:

The airport is swank. Clean and sparkling and extremely efficient. ... As we wait in the line where an elderly customs official and an assistant scrutinizes every piece of baggage carefully, I die of mortification. ... This is an Islamic nation with its own set of rules on what you can carry into the country and what you can't. Plants, icons, porks are all forbidden. I wasn't carrying contraband but my suitcase was going to trigger embarrassment and maybe even a few laughs when it would be my turn to open it. ... One of my travel-kit books advocate lining the top of the suitcase with sanitary pads. It has a great many use apart from the obvious one. It protects, pads, wedges, and you can always use it mop a spill... So far it's worked. So far I have never ever had to open my baggage to any custom official in any airport... The customs officer waves his hand. He tells us that we don't need to open up our baggage. The other passengers ahead of us and behind are not given this dispensation. I murmur a word of thanks. My travel star was shining bright and clear even though I was on the equator. (62)

The point to be noted here is that, even a much traveled and acclaimed writer like Anita Nair too fails to come out from her own cultural situations related to menstruation. Even the thought of others viewing the sanitary pads kept inside her bag was quiet 'embarrassing' and unimaginable for her. Her reaction could be viewed as the reflection of a social system which is conditioned according to the dominant power structures. If this is the situation with a person/woman who had traveled and encountered a lot of cultures, one is able to understand the power and influence of cultural taboos associated with menstruation.

The bodily situation which is the vital aspect of female subjectivity is generally suppressed in travel writings which are of course life writings too. So by blindly following a socio-cultural situation which doesn't allow to address even a physiological process which is quite normal, common and natural, the women writers themselves cut short the possibilities and potentials of female psyche, thereby curtails their own subjectivity

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## Affect and Body: Visualizing the War Dead at Kargil War Memorial

Ritika Pathania

### Abstract

This study aims to explore how soldier's body produces affective economies by visualizing the war dead at Kargil War Memorial. War memorial site becomes the visual text to be analyzed. Visual culture and iconography goes a long way in analyzing the politics of affect and body. The images of soldier's dead body in memorial's art gallery generate powerful visceral responses in the visitors. W.J.T. Mitchell's idea of image ("What Is an Image?") is pivotal to this study where he says: "Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures "made in the image" of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image." Since war cannot exist without physical bodies, the mobilisation, militarisation and disciplining of bodies is needed to carry out war. The combatant bodies are traumatised, mutilated and destroyed through war. The reality of war is not just politics by any other means, but politics written on the body. Where the dead are concerned, Katherine Verdery reminds us that "Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings" (*The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, 28). The war memorial also explores the different forms of mourning that structures the public and political memorialisation of soldiers and

enemies. The memorials to dead cops try to bury injustice in a display of ersatz collective grief.

This study aims to explore how the soldier's body produces affective economies by visualizing the war dead at Kargil War Memorial. War memorial site becomes the visual text to be analyzed. Visual culture and iconography goes a long way in analyzing the politics of affect and body. The images of the soldier's dead body in the Memorial's art gallery generate powerful visceral responses in the visitors. W.J.T. Mitchell's idea of image ("What Is an Image?") is pivotal to this study. He says: "Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures "made in the image" of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image."

Since war cannot exist without physical bodies, the mobilisation, militarisation and disciplining of bodies is needed to carry out war. The combatant bodies are traumatised, mutilated and destroyed through war. The reality of war is not just politics by any other means, but politics written on the body. Where the dead are concerned, Katherine Verdery reminds us that "Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings" (*The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, 28). The war memorial also explores the different forms of mourning that structures the public and political memorialisation of soldiers and enemies. The memorials to dead cops try to bury injustice in a display of ersatz collective grief.

**Key Words:** body politics, affect, visual culture, images, mourning

The war memorials examined in this study both celebrate founding events of the nation in which they are placed. Ricoeur points

out that “what we celebrate under the title of founding events are, essentially, acts of violence legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right.” (*Memory, History, Forgetting*; 79) This does not mean that the struggles undertaken by the state's military were illegitimate, but that we need to acknowledge that founding events almost always present one (victorious) narrative of the story. Memorials celebrating such events are part of what Kansteiner calls “the media of memory”, which helps us “construct and transmit our knowledge and feelings about the past”. (*Finding Meaning in Memory*; 190) War memorials commemorating a founding event can thus, through the use of political actors, embody the stories of (and serve as point of reference for) the origins of a certain community and establish their identity.

States typically use memorials to display their own interpretation of historical events. The interpretation of these events, however, is always a constructed memory: “The work of memory is not just a process of selecting events and details, but also a way of constructing a story line or assessment of those events that is based on an explicit or latent interpretive scheme” [emphasis in the original] (Gudkov 2005:2; see also van Dijk 2008; Wertsch 2002). Memorials are symbols of a version of events that exists in a society's collective memory; they are, to use Ladd's words, “selective aids to memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others” (1997:11). This means that the actual history of an event is less important than a mythologized version that has been stripped of extraneous or inconvenient details and made more palatable for public consumption (Kattago 2009; Kucherenko 2011; Rohdewald 2008).<sup>1</sup>

### **Affect Loaded Bodies**

By showing how military war dead invoke both powerful visceral responses and are firmly embedded in a specific culture, discourse

and ideology, this study hopes to illustrate how affect works ‘in context’ and to explore its role in collective war memory in a way that is sensitive to historical, cultural and other contextual specificities.

In looking at the role of affect in Kargil collective war memory, my approach is informed by literature that emphasizes historical and cultural dimensions of affect. In early seminal works on affect by, for instance, Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003), affect as bodily responses appear universalistic and acultural – understandable, of course, since the post-1990s’ ‘affective turn’ (Clough 2007) was a response to poststructuralist theories’ perceived overemphasis of the discursive and representational. Since the pre-symbolic biological body would also be pre- (or extra-) cultural, culture and history have not always been central to affect theory. However, cultural-historical dimensions are crucial in collective memory, which is always produced at the intersection of the personal world of affect and larger social and historical factors. While the affective system of the biological body may be universal, affective responses are ‘profoundly conditioned by cultural forces’ (Pruchnic and Lacey, 2011, p. 482).

Furthermore, affect is not “presocial,” as Massumi argues. There is a reflux back from conscious experience to affect, which is registered, however, as affect, such that “past action and contexts are conserved and repeated, autonomically reactivated but not accomplished; begun but not completed.” (*Affective Turn*; 4) Affect is a non-linear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion, are subtracted, but always with “a never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder.”<sup>5</sup>

As Clough further states in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*:

In this conceptualization, affect is not only theorized in terms of the human body. Affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to 'see' affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body's organic-physiological constraints. The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the nonorganic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the pre-individual bodily capacities to act, to engage, to connect—to affect and be affected. The affective turn, therefore, expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology and matter that is instigating a shift in thought in critical theory. (2)

This takes us to the idea of image by W.J.T. Mitchell where he says,

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures "made in the image" of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image (*What is an Image*, 3).

It depicts how images of war dead at the memorial site facilitate the 'affective turn' of interpretation.

In the following section I read the fallen soldier as this kind of affect-loaded object rich with condensed meanings and feelings.



**Picture 1.** A picture showing the coffins of Indian Soldiers at the art gallery of Kargil War Memorial. [Photograph clicked on 07 September 2017 at Kargil War Memorial, Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, India]

Picture 1 depicts the coffins of Indian soldiers with a caption showing "No sacrifice too great in the service of the motherland". The meaning here is imbued with the spirit of self sacrifice. The fallen soldier becomes a culturally familiar trope of the tragic hero, which evokes visceral and intense emotion, and argues that such an affective aspect is central to the War Memorial's mediation of memory.

Both the Indian Epic texts, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* portray the actions of the warriors in a heroic and moral context. In Hinduism, martial valour is emphasized. Air Marshal R.K. Nehra cites the Sanskrit sloka, "*Veer Bhogya Vasundhara*", that is, the mighty heroes will enjoy the earth (*Hinduism and Its Military Ethos*, 325). The theme of 'raGayajña' or the battle- sacrifice as explicated in the *Mahabharata* glorifies the war dead. The costs of conflict are represented by the catastrophe of war which depicts the battle sacrifice of numerous soldiers who fought in the name of the nation. It is the idea and ideal of the noble self sacrifice that is at the core of the display and a source of the affective capacity of the exhibit.



War memorials taken in this project portray the fallen soldiers as the epitome of self-sacrifice for the nation, emphasizing their bravery and the beauty of their spirit of self sacrifice. Soldiers, thus constructed as tragic heroes that embody the spirit of self sacrifice, become an emotive object at the War memorial. The display of a helmet sitting empty without its wearer stimulates the visitors' affective responses.

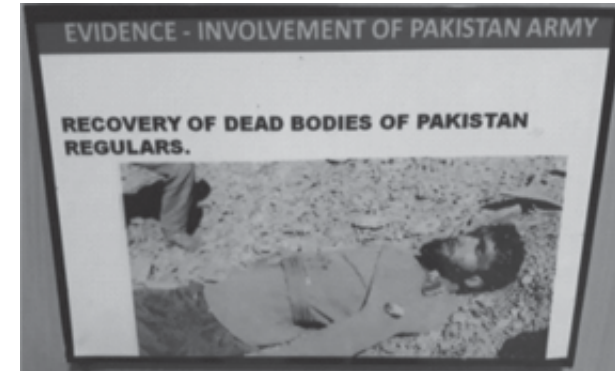


**Picture2.** Kargil War Memorial, Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, India.[Photograph clicked on 07 September 2017 at Kargil War Memorial, Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, India]



**Picture3.** Picture showing the dead bodies of Pakistani nationals at the art gallery of Kargil War Memorial.[Photograph clicked on 07 September 2017 at Kargil War Memorial, Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, India]

In contrast to the previous picture showing Indian soldiers' coffins, picture 2, which depicts the corpses of Pakistani nationals, states: "We Surprised Them". This, however, sends a message of the victorious Indian Army and defeated Pakistani nationals. It depicts the valour and strength of a nation. It evokes a sense of pride and patriotism in the viewer, and that is precisely the work of these memorial sites.



**Picture 4.** Picture showing the dead body of a Pakistani soldier and their involvement in the Kargil war displayed at the art gallery of the Memorial.[Photograph clicked on 07 September 2017 at Kargil War Memorial, Drass, Jammu and Kashmir, India]

The next picture, captioned "Evidence- Involvement of Pakistan Army. Recovery of Dead Bodies of Pakistan Regulars", depicts the wounded, drenched in blood corpse of a Pakistani Army soldier. The word 'evidence' symbolizes the Pakistani nation as 'rogue' and the Indian nation as 'heroic'. This representation of the 'self' and the 'other', the 'righteous' and the 'evil', takes us to Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde's often cited descriptions of other people's affective response to their blackness. Fanon remembers:

My body was given to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal,

the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, thenigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boyis trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering withcold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy istrembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, thelittle white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, thenigger's going to eat me up.(1952, p. 80)

While the white boy's fear, learned within a racist familial and social order, can attach to an unknown black object, Fanon's body is precisely not his own, but is 'sprawled out' and 'distorted', presented to him via the white boy's affective response. Lorde similarly recalls her realization that it is her body that is disgusting to a white woman sitting next to her on the bus:

When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realise that there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train . . . Something's going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.(1984, pp. 147\_/8)

The soldier becomes the instrument of 'nation politics'. The viewer refrains himself from sympathizing with the distressing sight of the dead corpse as the image is loaded with powerful visceral responses of an 'enemy' body. The raw sight of flesh and blood lying on concrete is affect imbued as it invokes the senses of its viewer the 'barrenness of land' which is synonymous to the 'costs of conflict' borne out of the brutal war

As pointed out by Rumi Sakamoto in "Mobilizing Affect for Collective War Memory":

While survivors can remember, tell their stories and resist aestheticization and romanticization, the dead do not speak, reflect or criticize. It is easier to objectify the dead as a source of catharsis and inspiration that is at once emotionally authentic and highly controlled. (*Cultural Studies*, 169-170).

Thus, Kargil War memorial weaves stories and displays images of young men, who, despite their human feelings, accepted to die 'for the nation'. Their image, set in the culturally compelling trope of the tragic hero, mobilizes affective energy and produces an emotionally authentic experience for the memorial visitors.

**Note: All the pictures used in this paper are copyright of the author and if cited anywhere must be given proper citation of the author.**

- i. As cited in 'BRINGING STALIN BACK IN: CREATING A USEABLE PAST IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA" by Todd H. Nelson August, 2013.

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## **Dalit Body: History, Representation and Resistance in the Songs of Poikayil Appachan**

**Jayasurya Rajan**

### **Abstract**

History always tried to ignore the lower castes while writing historiographies. History is a kind of memory which together creates the subjectivity. Without histories the existence becomes miserable hence the historical existence must be there. Dalits are excluded in the written histories; they fail to represent the mainstream histories because they were kept outside the language and knowledge systems. Poikayil Appachan was a revolutionary renaissance leader who had broken all the societal norms in the name of caste. He was influenced by Christianity and converted but there he was neither treated as a Christian nor Hindu. But the conversion never changed his caste. Hence he realized the fact that whether he is a Hindu or a Christian, only the caste matters. A Dalit body will always remain as a slave body irrespective of its religion. This realization was a revolution; he understood that knowledge is power. With his gained knowledge he sang songs against the injustices in the society. The songs were eye openers in the veiled society. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore markets were famous for its inhuman slave trade, where Dalits were treated like mere animals. When a slave is urged to till the land with an oxen, the Dalit Body posses an animal existence. Appachan songs were such powerful in the sense that it proclaims that Dalit too have a history which was unwritten. Hence Appachan's songs represent a group of people who were kept in darkness for centuries.

History tends to ignore the presence and existence of lower castes while writing historiographies. Historical existence is inevitable as history is a kind of memory which together creates the subjectivity. Dalits are excluded from the written histories; mainstream histories fail to represent them because they were kept outside the language and knowledge systems. Poikayil Appachan was a revolutionary renaissance leader from Kerala who has broken all the societal norms in the name of caste. He was influenced by Christianity and converted but there he was neither treated as a Christian nor Hindu as the conversion never changed his caste. Hence he realized the fact that whether he is a Hindu or a Christian, only the caste matters. A Dalit body will always remain as a slave body irrespective of its religion. This realization was a revolution; he understood that knowledge is power. With his gained knowledge he sang songs against the injustices in the society. The songs were eye-openers in the veiled society. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore markets were famous for its inhuman slave trade where Dalits were treated like mere animals. When a slave is urged to till the land with an oxen, the Dalit Body possesses an animal existence. Appachan's songs were powerful in the sense that it proclaims that Dalit too have a history which was unwritten. Hence Appachan's songs represent a group of people who were kept in darkness for centuries.

Power changed its equations with the evolution of time. It has become the centre of each and everything. Power controls all and so that the terms like freedom and liberation got entangled in the system. The expansion of power made the common man into a state of struggle. The struggle varies according to the conditions. The struggle against hegemony has its roots in the culture of a particular place. The constructed culture offers different identities to the individual such as linguistic, racial and at religious level. These identities owe them to the upper class that they are meant to be controlled by the power which the upper class possessed. The upper class status itself becomes an identity

to hold the power. Hence, the constructed upper caste identity holds the power and becomes the hegemonic part of the system. The second kind of struggle is the struggle against economic exploitation. The economic inequalities are linked with power in a way that the one who holds the power controls the resources and all the lower strata turns as the working force. But at the pinnacle of such economic and all kind of exploitations the world witnessed several revolutions against the system. The third one is the struggle against the construction of individual as subjects. Identity is quite different from the term subjectivity. Identity is just an existential term whereas subjectivity has many deeper meanings. When an individual is fallen in the ambit of ideology, it is a subject; hence the revolt is against all those ideologies which have made him/her a subject. When the physical body is urged to fulfill the interests of the upper caste community, naturally there evolves a slave. The community formulates rules and regulations, makes classifications and the idea of pure and impure and as a result a kind of identity bestows upon subjects, which cannot be changed.

Dalit bodies are kept out of history. The written histories exclude the existence of lower castes who were slaves of the society. Poikayil Appachan who was the renaissance leader of the twentieth century fought against all this injustices. He was born as a lower caste later converted to Christianity because of the inequality in the Hindu religion. But Appachan could not withstand there anymore because conversion only changed his religion not caste. He himself and his people remained as the lower castes itself and then he took the revolutionary decision of burning the Bible which later became a threat to his life. Further he started the debates on the topic- slave as a subject.

Appachan addresses the whole depressed classes through his narratives which echo the serfdom of centuries. It criticizes the Brahminical and elite knowledge supremacy from the margins. Dalits

were divided into different castes, it was the propaganda of Brahmins for their divide and rule policy. The Brahmin *Dharma* and *Artha* were the traditional formulas to control the societal body. The Dharma theory insisted the idea of purity and pollution material wealth and methods of maintaining it. The *Artha* theory holds different meanings such as wealth power and success. Altogether the theories of *Dharma* and *Artha* contributed the formation of the subjected body called Dalit. Economically and politically powerless Dalit bodies are easy to annex and oppressions are part of the law. Phule says: "they wanted to exploit the labor of the *shudras* and *atishudras* to sustain not only their own luxurious life style but also that of their future generations. To achieve this devious goal, they created the fraudulent rigmarole of the caste system and wrote several books to legitimize the caste system"(19-20:2008). Dalit body was enslaved in a way that they were orphaned by the system unable to identify the self. This division of caste was the division of labor, which resulted in the imbalance of the system. This sub-caste system created a rift between Dalits which was favorable to the upper castes. They were inflicted with the burden of purity and pollution in the name of caste. Ambedkar says: caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change. Caste may be mad, Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man"(289:2002).

The songs oppose the caste hegemony that exists all over India irrespective of the religion. Appachan points out the existence of slavery through his songs as they are enslaved in the name of God, religion, nation, caste and rituals He examined the histories so as to read it in the present scenario and to identify the subjectivity. Without history and memory one cannot identify the self. Hence finding a place in history is finding representation. Appachan succeeded in representing the suppressed groups and thereby retrieving the human existence of Dalits.

The recognition that centuries of sufferings and darkness has been a deception, was a light of hope to the suppressed lives. In order to come out of the constructed societal identities the lower castes continued the struggle. Dalits have been longing for the subjectivity in which their history and memory are intertwined. In order escape from the chains of Hinduism and caste system Dalits converted into Christianity.

Conversion was considered as an act of emancipation earlier but it was like travelling from darkness to darkness. Through conversion Dalits were given a new identity in religious terms but the caste remained there and it didn't help them to create an identity nor history. Hence Appachan formed 'Prathyaksha Raksha Dheiva Sabha' which later paved the way for the liberation of a subjugated group of people. Conversion as a form of resistance helped them to move on for a while. Ambedkar says: "My conversion is not for any material gain. There is nothing which I cannot achieve by remaining as an untouchable...The Hindu religion does not appeal to my self- respect"(37:2004). Hence conversion is a political stand taken by the oppressed in order to escape from the constructed identity. But the Church rejected the notion of equality because of the prevalent upper caste Christians who refused to mingle with the lower caste. The Christian missionaries brought the theory of Soap, soup, salvation to the colonized people and it was applied to the converted Christians. Primarily the colonial bodies are not pure enough to achieve identity, secondly the food style was considered not as a healthy one and the barbarians need salvation. But the slave caste body has undergone a transformation with the changing living style. This injustice has been questioned in one of his songs:

We travelled long without any kinship  
All along the peripheral paths of Hinduism  
We wandered long as orphans  
All along the peripheral paths of Christianity. (33:2008)

The upper-class agitations and oppressions have been prevented with the unity of the lower castes. Appachan's songs were counter narratives to the existing form of literature. He was the one who was kept out of knowledge system and he learned reading and writing which helped him to realize the betrayal of centuries. The Dalit quest for identity arouse with the Prathyaksha Raksha Dheiva Sabha movement of Appachan. Appachan rectified the lack of history and memory through his songs. The songs tried to retrieve and reconstruct the lost self in the slave body. In one of his songs he says,

Sold for money  
 Killed too if they wished  
 Sold along with the land  
 Can the slave ever forget  
 Yoked with oxen and buffaloes  
 Used to plough the fields  
 The sorrow O God almighty  
 Can we ever forget .(32:2008)

The particular song describes how the Dalit bodies are treated like animals. The upper castes made them to yoke with bulls and buffaloes without humanity. The slave body too has a soul which in *Slavery* says Jyothibha Phule : "Only slaves can understand what it is to be a slave and what joy it is to be delivered from the chains of slavery"(15:2008). Ploughing the field with animals has given the slave body a kind of animal existence. Appachan questions this animal-like existence by recollecting the past of slave trade in Travancore. The 19<sup>th</sup> century period witnessed the rise of a slave market in Kottayam where Dalits were sold as animals. One of his poems explains the pain of parents who were sold to different landlords from two directions. The orphaned children were never given importance. Appachan recalls the story of a slave mother who was asked to go to the field after two days

of her child birth. The work was to transplant the paddy and she took her new born child to the field and lulled the child to sleep. After work when she returned her child had become a corpse eaten by ants. Such memories invoke the injustices of the past which was inhuman. Such a society which claims the universal theory of love and peace is an irony. The stories of their ancestors' sufferings remain as a never healing pain in the slave memory. The songs which recollect the past recollect the history too. Appachan taught them the importance of history so that the mistakes which happened in the history cannot be repeated in future. It also became the cause for the identification of the suppressed self. This collective memory of Dalits questioned the wageless labour, the idea of untouchability and the notion of inequality. In order to degrade the untouchables they were given names which evokes hatred in others. So the slavery was inflicted from top to bottom not only to the body but also to the soul and self. The term slave itself becomes revolutionary in the sense that words like slave tears, age of slavery, slave body, yoke of slaves, slave family and chain of slaves constituted an emotional realm to the movement. Apart from the discourses the Prathyaksha Raksha Dheiva Sabha movement mentions the existence of their histories in the Dravidian sites of Indus valley. The discourses give references to Sir John Marshall who was an archeologist who conducted studies at the Indus valley. Sanal Mohan says: "The term history is deployed to generate deeper meanings and they provide elements with which the identity of the people is constituted, that it helps achieve subjectivity and agency for people who recall this collective memory" (291:2015). Appachan's movements resulted in finding places in history, PRDS tried to recollect the slave experiences. So the memories of slave experiences make Dalits claim the equality which was denied to them. "The discourse of history is important in the discourse of equality. Equality is imagined both in the social origins of Dalits as well as in the contemporary structuring of them vis-à-vis other social groups"(272: 2015). Appachan argues that the slave castes too

possessed a historical past which was destroyed by the conquerors. He says that the retrieval of history is the way to salvation. Dalit communities constructed a history from the relics of their past and thus brought a social change. The social construction of the Dalit body replaces the slave body which was the epitome of suffering. Historicizing the slave experiences was the first step toward representation. Documentation helps in recasting the slave body in the present scenario. The organic intellectual interpretations of history vary from the academic ones; however the politics of local history finds a place in the narrations. Academic history works in a set of canons where the other is beyond the discipline. The local histories are written and assumed in a way that everyone and every place has a history of its own even if it lacks documentation. Such alternative histories began to challenge the existing histories because particular communities are absent in the mainstream historiography. The so called valid histories continued its process where alternative histories too are involved, thus the politics of knowledge production included the 'other' in historiography partially. During the theorization of history Appachan found that it is a difficult task to recollect the memories of past and he sings:

No, no letter is seen  
 On my race  
 So many histories are seen  
 On so many races.(17:2008)

It is the lamentation of a slave excluded from the history. Not having a historical past is a kind of 'lack'. Later in the histories too there existed a kind of double identification. Whether they are slaves or humans, this in-between space created a complicated state of affairs in the Dalit life worlds. The double consciousness began to disappear with the identification of the self which was neither Hindu nor Christian. The whole movement was a process first, the recollected slave memory

which evoked the pain of centuries gradually ending up in a reconciled state that they are no more slaves. It evolved into a state which is beyond the theory of purity and pollution, beyond the concept of body, soul and salvation. The erasure of the slave body was the rebirth of the new body which possesses history and memory. Hence Appachan's poetry and movement played a crucial role in transforming the Dalit/Slave body to a new political realm of subjectivity with the realization self and soul. The experiences from the past as slave of the upper castes, as a slave of the Christianity and as a slave of self and body have broken all the chains of bondage as Dalits are recasting themselves in the recollected history which is a kind of representation and resistance on their part.

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## Exiled Body and Bombay City: A Study on the Selected Poems of Adil Jussawalla

Divya Shah

### Abstract

The late twentieth century is the significant site in terms of the notion of body which takes "discursive turn" (Zita 786) with its discursive production, challenges the binary relationship between active mind and passive body and biological sex and culturally constructed gender. Furthermore, it is important to note that the twentieth century has also become a significant site for reflecting the shifting notion in the concept of the city as the city becomes a major concept of cultural and social theories during the same time period. Bombay becomes the significant site of study as twentieth century plays major role in terms of shaping this city, the earlier cosmopolitan city with its migrants and immigrants shifting to parochial ethnic chauvinism - a symbol of the city's "decosmopolitanization" and "provincialization" (Varma 220). Taking into consideration the above ideas, the present paper attempts to study the selected poems of Adil Jussawalla's collection *Missing Person* published in 1976. It attempts to study the discursive construction of the body of the city in the context of the city's relationship to an urban man who is an outsider or exiled or migrant to the city. Analysing the use of various cinematic techniques, the paper discusses how the use of these techniques allow the poems to create fragmented corporeality in context of an individual as well as that of a city.



The period of 1970s is significant in context of poststructuralist notions of the body as Zita delineates how “the collapse of the sex (as biology) and gender (as a culture) distinction” is central to 1970s feminism (Zita 786). It's important to note that “bodies are of central importance in the poststructuralist project” and within Poststructuralist thinkers, Butler's concept of discursively constructed body not only rejects the mind/subject and body/object relation (Larsson 5-7) but also establishes the idea of discursive construction as “(re)theorization of “materiality” itself” (Cotter 227) where this “materiality of bodies is itself a social/historical/cultural construct” (Bloodsworth 632).

The above illustration is important to understand the concept of discursively constructed body of the city which is central to my discussion. The city which is focused in this study is Bombay. Bombay becomes the significant site around 1960s as twentieth century plays a major role in terms of shaping this city, the earlier cosmopolitan city with its migrants and immigrants shifting to parochial ethnic chauvinism - a symbol of the city's “decosmopolitanization” and “provincialization” (Varma 220).

Taking into consideration the above argument, the present paper attempts to study the discursive construction of the body of the city in the context of the city's relationship to an urban man who is an outsider or exiled or migrant to the city. It attempts to study the selected poems of Adil Jussawalla's collection *Missing Person* published in 1976. The selected poems are “Missing Person”, “Nine Poems on Arrival” and “Waiters” where the first two poems deal with the city's relationship with an individual who feels the sense of exile in their own city whereas the last poem provides the outsider's perspective and their relationship with the city.

“Missing Person” and “Nine Poems on Arrival” discuss how an individual returning to the native city feels the sense of exile in own city.

Further, it also attempts to study how the city undergoes changes and feels the sense of exile.

In order to understand the concept of exile, the study has primarily taken insights from Edward Said's essay “Reflections on Exile”. In the essay, he discusses the state of exile from various perspectives. For Said, “to be an exile is to remain always skeptical and always on guard” (Pannian 87). According to him, “exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid or secure (Said 148). He challenges the popular notion of exile as “abandoning a place of beginning” (88) which leads to his concept of metaphorical exile. It is “a cultural and psychological uprootedness...that turns people into exile in their own lands” (Zeng 1). Further, elaborating Said's idea in her book *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space in Hispanic Literature*, Sophia McCleannen discusses two types of exile: transnational existence of exile and material existence of exile (1). Elaborating the transnational existence, she argues that such existence is possible within the world of “globalization, which does not lead to a power free, liberated, multicultural state of being” (1). In the context of a modern metropolis such as Bombay, this idea of exile is significant which further leads to her definition of exile as a “metaphor for a new phase of social alienation” (1). Similarly, Pannian also discusses “metaphysical alienation” (Pannian 88) apart from “dislocated from the place of origin” (88) where “exile is not that home and love for home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (Mufti 98).

Taking insights from the above argument, the poem “Missing person” portrays the notion of exile on various levels. The title of the poem which is also the title of the entire collection is significant as it echoes the narrator's feelings of being exiled in the native city. The exile is captured at various levels in the poem. For instance, the third section of the poem discusses exile in terms of language, as it compares the two languages: English represented by “A” and Devnagari represented

by “अ” where the poem claims that “A’s here to stay...That’s why you learn it today” (Jussawalla 14). By indicating the position of Devnagari, the poem indicates colonial influence and how the colonial language overpowers the regional language. In the same section, the poem depicts the conversation between the two languages:

‘Wiped out,’ they say....  
 You’re your country’s lost property  
 with no office to claim you back.  
 You’re polluting our sounds,’... they say.

The imaginary conversation portrayed in the poem between “you” and “they” indicates the monologue of “they” in commanding tone where “you” is the silent listener. Using an imperative structure, the poem portrays how ‘they’ obliterates ‘you’. This ‘you’ and ‘they’ refer to two groups of people using these languages where ‘you’ stands for the colonized Devnagari group and ‘they’ stands for the colonizer English group. Devnagari is referred to as “country’s lost property” and it shows the exiled state of Devnagari in its own country. Depicting the miserable state of this language, the poem writes “Curled in a cortical lobe (department of languages), an unspeakable family gibbered” (Jussawalla Missing 15). The Devnagari is metaphorically “unspeakable” as it does not have any voice in its own place. It is important to refer to Spivak’s essay “Marginality in the Teaching Machine” where she defines language as a presupposition of “feeling of cultural identity” (Spivak 60). Further, discussing the contemporary scenario of multilingual India, she argues that the national language Hindi is “slightly exiled from national language” (Spivak 77). Here the exiled state of the group of people attached to specific language refers to the disenchantment of the Indian middle classes with their colonial and capitalist alienation from mass” (Mishra 231). The mass associated with Devnagari language is not acceptable by the elite bourgeois group represented by “A”. Amrita Dutta supports this argument as she considers Jussawalla as one who is “attuned to

the politics of language” (Dutta Indian Express). As the poem progresses, it discusses the notion of exile not just in the context of isolating a particular group of people based on language differences in the city, but also portrays the sense of exile at the level of an individual. The fifth section of the poem is significant as it explicitly refers to “Missing Person”. This fragmented section portrays the body of the ‘missing person’. This body is fragmented as already discussed in the previous sections where the protagonist Jack and the city, both are looked at as ‘missing person’. The poem further portrays the body of this missing person in the fifth section as below:

Lock up his hands.  
 His hands aren’t there (Jussawalla Missing 17).

This missing person who serves as personified city is without hands as they are locked and of no use. These hands, which are missing stand as a metaphor in the poem. It is possible to compare these hands with the working class of the city which became the major part of the city’s economical development since the late nineteenth century (Chandvarkar 13). Tracing the history of Bombay’s mill workers, Chandvarkar argues that the city’s working class’ presence in the civil life of the city gets nullified from 1970s (26). It is possible to see this progressive decline of the city’s working class as the missing hands of the city. Discussing this in detail, Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon in their book *One Hundred Years One Hundred Voices: The Millworkers of Girangaon: an Oral History* narrates the oral story of the sufferance of the workers after the closing of textile mills of the city. According to them, after the closing of the mills, the “industrial India’s heartland” (Dossal 367) is replaced by “luxury apartments, office space, and entertainment centres” (367) and they make the city “a foreign country for the working poor” (367). With the end of the mill culture in the city, these metaphorical hands of the city are “not there” where they were earlier (Jussawalla Missing 17). In the line “And we know of no work

they've done" (17) the narrator becomes sarcastic towards a city's indifferent approach towards these laboring 'hands of the city' as he indicates how "the laboring poor who made the city the nation's industrial metropolis with a uniquely multicultural identity" (Dossal 365) is completely ignored by the group of "we" that stands for the city elites and "land sharks" (365). This absence of these hands engenders the feeling of loss to the city. Here it is important to understand this loss in context of McCleannen's argument about exile as she explains how the notion of exile is associated with the sense of "loss and anguish" (McCleannen 1). Here the metaphorical hand, which is the working class of the city is no more as it was and this sense of loss creates the feeling of exile for the city. Discussing the downfalls of mills and its impact on the city, Adarkar argues that along with the decline of the mill culture, the city loses its "distinctive working class culture" (Dossal 366) and the poem expresses this pain of loss of this culture in the line "It's missing" (Jussawalla Missing 17). The fragmented body of the city which is narrated through disjointed structures presents the modern experience of exile. This sense of exile represented by "the loss of" city's working class culture is further intensified by the loss of the diversity of the city owing to "silly vernacular cries" (Jussawalla Missing 17). Here the "vernacular cries" indicates the "vernacularization of city" which can be understood through Hansen's book *Violence in Urban India: Identity Politics, 'Mumbai', and the Postcolonial City*. Hansen provides a detailed account of how after the winning linguistic movement of 1957 and creation of Maharashtra state in 1960, the nativist party such as Shiv Sena "reworked the discourse of regionalism and redeployed it as xenophobic populism in the face of the ambivalences and anxieties that the urban experience of Bombay produced among many Marathi speakers" (Hansen 11). Further, the development of this vernacularization and its impact on the social atmosphere of the city is discussed by Gyan Prakash, who argues that "the passing away of Bombay's self-image as a modern sophisticated city and as a place that prided itself on its cultural diversity" (Prakash 98) was formalized

"when the Shiv Sena officially renamed Bombay as Mumbai" (98). Against this vernacularization, the city reacts as "nothing to speak of" (Jussawalla Missing 17). This state of the city where it is unable to withstand this vernacularization, brings a pain to the city. This painful condition for the city keeps it into the state of exile as one of the meanings that the term exile denotes is as 'painful state of being' (McCleannen 1).

From the above arguments, it can be said that the poem "Missing Person" portrays the city's sense of exile in terms of its fragmentation and disillusionment. It is important to note that the exiled body of the city is projected by the various modernist traits such as cinematic techniques used in the poems. Drawing attention to the influence that cinema has on Jussawalla's poems, Bruce King argues "*Missing Person* has the feeling of quick moving, roughly-cut movie with rapid shifts of focus, an abruptness which is supported by a deliberately flat diction drawn from clichés, advertising and mass culture" (King 249). The poem exhibits how use of cinematic technique allows the poem to create fragmented corporeality in context of an individual as well as that of a city.

Discussing the interconnection between modernist poetry and cinema, Susan McCabe in her book *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* states that "a desire to include bodily experience" (3) which is otherwise unavailable "except mediated through mechanical reproduction" (3) leads the modernist poems to the use of cinematic techniques (3). This point is significant in context of the present poem as the poem uses various cinematic techniques in order to create the fragmented body of the protagonist Jack and that of the city. For instance, the second section of the poem begins with: "For The First Time on Your Screen/ MISSING JACK/ A slave's revolt and fall" (Jussawalla Missing 13). The above line allows the comparison of the poem to watch a cinema as the word "screen" which belongs to the register of film indicating the "silver screen" (Kuhn and Westwell 363) of cinema. This movie effect can be interpreted as "cinema's tremendous impact upon

modernist poems" (McCabe 3). Moreover, the poem uses some of the cinematic cuts in order to narrate protagonist Jack's life and death. For instance, the narrator says, "His first cry with his mother/ his last look with a wall –" (Jussawalla Missing 13). The *Dictionary of Poetic Terms* incorporates "cuts" under the area of editing and identifies it as one of the basic areas from where poetry borrows the "cinematic techniques" (Myers and Wukasch 58). According to Myers and Wukasch, crosscut is marked by "ironic contrast" (58) and in the present sentence the crosscut indicates the two events simultaneously: protagonist's birth indicated by his "first cry" is contrasted by his death indicated by his "last look". This juxtaposition of life and death in the beginning indicates the insignificance attached to the life of the protagonist. This insignificant attitude is also reflected in the line "no final corral" (Jussawalla Missing 13) which indicates that the protagonist's death is so trivial for the society that his body does not even receive a "final corral"(13). Further, using various fragmented images of Jack such as his "last look" (13) and "his seed with fugitive bodies" (13), the poem creates a fragmented body of Jack, the protagonist. It also uses jump cuts as indicated in the poem "jump cuts here from mother to mistress and back" (Jussawalla Missing 13) in order to indicate the violation of continuity (Fabel 261) which again points out to the sense of fragmentation and disjointedness of Jack's body.

However, the omniscient narrator who screens Jack's story in the earlier stanza suddenly declares "That speeding train – It is my life" (14) in the next stanza. This shift in the point of view on the one hand creates ambiguity between the "narrative instance and the protagonist" (Diaz 57) and on the other hand also reflects a "discontinuous narrative", one of the features of modernist poetry (Barry 65). The constant merging of cinema in the poem is pointed out by a line "It's only a movie"(Jussawalla Missing 14). This constant use of film techniques helps this poem create "the moving "lived" body" which "ruptures fantasies of physical wholeness" (McCabe 3). The moving body

compared to the speeding train can be interpreted as the moving body of the city itself. Further, using the close up shot, which "scrutinize details" (Myers and Wukasch 62), he says, "Those are my hands – split –" (Jussawalla Missing 14). The sentence shows the fragmentation at two levels: first at the physical level and second at the structural level. The fragmented syntax suggests the poem's "liking for fragmented forms" which is a feature of modernist poetry (Barry 62). The split hands which are metaphor of the city's fragmented body refer to the scenario of the city during the period of 60s to 70s. In this context, it is important to take some insights from Hansen's text *Violence in Urban India: Identity Politics 'Mumbai' and the Post Colonial City* which discusses the city's journey from cosmopolitan Bombay to communalist Mumbai in the context of Shiv Sena, "the discourse of regionalism" and its "xenophobic populism" that influences the city during the time of 1960s and 70s. (Hansen 11).

Furthermore, the progression in the poem indicates how the city and protagonist Jack merge into each other as the poem shifts from "I" and "He" to "We" as the poem says,

Nothing we put in stayed put...

We poured in the tonics

but nothing sweetened his tongue.

He thrust it out

Again and again

the bloodied head of an arrow (Jussawalla Missing 20).

The above stanza shows the protagonist merges with the city and becomes 'we'. Moreover, it also reveals that both are against the violence spreads by 'him' which is indicated by 'the bloodied head of an arrow'. This intersection between the body of the protagonist and that of the city can be understood through the argument of Edward Soja. Discussing the organization of the postmodern metropolis, he argues that they reflect

"fragmentation, dislocation and decentering" which is a "mirror image of the mental constitution of its inhabitants, often reflecting feeling of confusion" (Brandt 553). Here, the poem portrays how the city and its individual share the "fragmented nature of contemporary experience" (Barry 30) through their fragmented bodies. Further, the poem reinforces this fragmentation as depicted in the line "Once, I was whole, I was all" (Jussawalla Missing 14). This is an outcry of the personified city as well as the protagonist Jack. It indicates their current "fragmented corporeality" (McCabe 3).

Furthermore, the use of disjointed images as discussed earlier also draws attention to its link to the notion of exile. Hong Zeng who studies the notion of exile within the film codes in contemporary Chinese cinema, interprets this disjointedness within image as a state of exile (Zeng 9). This sense of exile is also reflected in the title "Missing Person" (Jussawalla Missing 13). The title itself becomes the metaphor which delineates the sense of exile in social, political and cultural terms as Said points out the sense of exile in "the experience of minority existence in modernity" (Mufti 104). Jack's insignificant death and city's outcry for wholeness indicates their uprootedness which is later on echoed in the poem: "Exile's a broken axle/goes back/... goes back to where/a mirror shakes in recognition" (Jussawalla Missing 18).

In comparison to city's exile discussed in "Missing Person", the poem "Nine Poems on Arrival" describes an individual's point of view who returns to his homeland after many years and finds himself alienated from the city. The poem is in the first person where "I" of the narrator is significant. The beginning of the poem indicates the narrator's journey back to the home land as he says, "I step off the plane" (Jussawalla Nine 47). The next line "Garlands beheading the body" (Jussawalla Nine 47) is a pun, as on the one hand it indicates the greeting of the narrator and on the other hand, it indicates the death of the narrator. The death of the narrator is solidified with the following line "and everyone

dressed in white" (47) where the white dress indicates the incident of death. This metaphorical death of the narrator can be seen as his unidentified relationship with the city that is portrayed in the question, "who are we ghosts of?" (Jussawalla Nine 47). The word 'ghost' possibly indicates the absence of specific relations that the speaker had with the city in the past. It also can be interpreted as a metaphorical death of the speaker as he feels alienated from the city. The references such as "cold hands, cold feet" along with "white cloths" and "Garlands beheading the body" are some of the references to this metaphorical death. The death which is used as the pun in the poem can be analyzed at two levels: it might be the metaphorical death of the narrator and it might refer to the death of the city itself. It might be possible to discuss city's transition from cosmopolitan to the regionalism. In this context, discussing the Shiv Sena's rise from the 1960s and its impact on the city, Hansen argues that "the historical formation of the political discourse...changed Bombay from being the preeminent symbol of India's secular, industrial modernity to become a powerful symbol of the very crisis of this vision" (Hansen 8). Along with this socio political transformation, the poem also draws attention to materialist capitalist aspect of city's body as described in the poem, "We talk a language of beads along well established wires. The beads slide, they open, they devour each other" (Jussawalla Nine 47). Here the beads signify the money involved in stock exchange interconnected with computers indicated by "well established wires". He satirizes that human beings have also become the beads who not only just slide in their relationship, but also devour each other. Thus, this materialist and communal body of the city is unacceptable to the narrator who feels alienated when he returns to the homeland. It is possible to interpret his metaphorical death in the sentence "the sun would be lower here to wash my neck in" (Jussawalla Nine 47) as his alienation from the present city. The speaker's nostalgia represented in the lines, "Upset like water/I dive for my favourite tree/ which is no longer there" (47). The narrator's yearning for the lost cosmopolitan city is unveiled through the above lines where

the tree becomes the possible metaphor for the city itself. In this context, Dutta argues that "political consciousness" (Dutta ) is one of the significant aspects of *Missing Person*. However, from the tone of despair, the narrator shifts to the optimistic tone as he says, "Though they've let its roots remain"(47).

Hence, "Nine Poems on Arrival" and "Missing Person" are two poems which narrate not just the individual's sense of exile in his own city but also depict the city's experience as an exiled person. The metaphorical exile through social alienation which is expressed through above poems can be supported through Jussawalla's statement: "I accept a marginal identity and feel compelled to celebrate it"(Dutta). The transition from cosmopolitanism not just affects the one for whom the city is a home town but also troubled the outsiders who come to Bombay. Tracing the history of the outsider's relationship with the city, Prakash argues that the city becomes a living place for many communities such as Parsis, Muslims, Jews, Arabs, English, Portuguese and many others during the colonial time (Prakash Fable 56). They not just administered the city, but also led the city towards growth (Padma 2119). However, these "non – maharashtrians"(Hansen 45) become outsiders when Marathi speakers of Bombay who "found themselves at the lower rungs of the labour market" (Hansen 45) and attempted to create city's "regional identity" (41) through their support to various nativist groups of the city (45). The poem "Waiters" illustrates how the protagonists are part of an "influx of outsiders" (Prakash 2119) who come to Bombay city in order to be a part of it.

The poem "Waiters" is about a young person from TamilNadu coming to Bombay for "better prospects" (Jussawalla Waiters112) in the city. The poem narrates the life of a Tamilian waiter in Bombay and his relationship with the city from a third person point of view. In "Waiters", the narrator provides the spatial perspective where a place such as restaurant brings rich "epicures with their "stuffed heart" (Jussawalla

Waiters 112) together with migrant waiters who "button up their manners with the past"(112) and stay in this city. The restaurant there becomes a common platform shared by penurious waiters and opulent customers who otherwise belong to different classes. As an outsider, his expectation from the city is expressed in the line "The long summers they abjured, for the chance of better prospects, change, a sun of contrast" (112). It reflects the image of the city as a commercial capital of India which attracts the outsiders. Discussing Bombay's history in the article "Urbanism, mobility and Bombay: Reading the Post-Colonial City", Bill Ashcroft argues that "cosmopolitanism, its economic success" and "indifferent attitude to the varied past of its residents" (Ashcroft 499) of the city were some of the reasons of attraction for migrants (499). However, this image of the city collapses when the narrator depicts how the city treats these outsiders: "stick in a language their clients won't allow. Must button up their manner with the past" (Jussawalla Waiters 112). The above lines provide the idea that the distinct cultural identity of outsiders reflected through their language is not acceptable to the city's regional atmosphere. In this context, it is important to note how the nativist party of the city deals with the outsiders. In his article, "The Shiv Sena – An Eruption of Sub-Nationalism" Morkhandikar discusses how the party is "most bitter against the South Indians" (Morkhandikar 1905) and it "launched its violent crusade in the late 1960s" (Ghosh 466). The non-acceptance of the outsiders by the city is reflected in the narrator's sentence "they stand aloof" (Jussawalla Waiters 112). This metaphorical aloofness not only indicates the physical distance of the waiters from the customers but also shows how the city maintains its distance from such outsiders. The pronoun "they" used for the outsiders also marks the distance that the city keeps with them. The ending of the poem is marked by a sarcastic remark as it narrates how at the end of the day these waiters "slip to their sleeping places /In the throat of the feasted pink faced city" (Jussawalla Waiters 112). The 'pink faced city' is a metaphorical indication of how the city with its outer

healthy economic body actually suffers from hunger. The end of the poem ironically depicts that the city fails to provide food to these "guardians of good taste"(Jussawalla Waiters 112). Thus, the poem provides the third person point of view about an outsider who not only suffers poverty, but also fails to be a part of the city.

Thus, the paper brings out two bodies, one is of an individual and the other is of the city itself. Both are exiled bodies where exile is not only confined to its literal sense, but also entails the metaphorical sense of the term as prevailed in the poem "Missing Person". Just like a Tamilian waiter, the cosmopolitan body of the city itself becomes an outsider as discussed in many of the poems above. Further, using the disjointed images, fragmented narratives and cinematic techniques, the paper constructs the fragmented body. This fragmentation and social uprootedness form an exiled body of an individual and that of the city which later on merges into each other.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

### Diotima's: A Journal of New Readings (ISSN: 2319-4189)

The Department of English, Providence Women's College, Kozhikode invites papers for its Annual Journal Diotima's: A Journal of New Readings 2018 issue on **Socio-Political Manifestations of Mythopoesis in Contemporary Literatures/Films/Arts**. We welcome well-researched and theoretically grounded research papers from academicians and research scholars from departments of English, Women Studies, Philosophy, Social Sciences and other interdisciplinary areas pertaining to the broad area of Mythopoeia. There is no publication fee and the papers will be selected based on peer review process.

Myths, legends, folklores, oral narratives and epics significantly mould the cultural psyche of communities worldwide. Distinctively spatio-temporal in origin, these have traversed both spatial and temporal borders, evolving in multifarious forms, yielding themselves to the demands of both space and time. Honestly open to reinterpretations by nature, these cultural artifacts today are subject to renewed political metamorphosis along the diverse points of the ideological spectrum. Keeping in view the contemporary challenges that manipulate, deconstruct and reconstruct mythology and classical narratology, the next issue of Diotima's invites scholarly articles and research papers on the socio-political manifestations of mythopoesis in recent literatures/films/arts recovering subjugated knowledges, thereby restructuring history, philosophy and even science.

Those who are interested can email their article to the mail id diotimajournal@gmail.com by July 1, 2018. The papers will undergo blind peer reviewing and you will be intimated regarding the selection of your paper within a short while.

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**Statement about ownership and other particulars of  
DIOTIMA'S**

**Form IV  
(See Rule 8)**

1. Place of Publication : Kozhikode
2. Periodicity : Annual
3. Printer's Name : Dr. Jessamma Joseph  
(Sr. M. Neetha A.C.)  
  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Principal,  
Providence Women's College,  
Kozhikode
4. Publisher's Name : Dr. Jessamma Joseph  
(Sr. M. Neetha A.C.)  
  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Principal,  
Providence Women's College,  
Kozhikode
6. Name and addresses of individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than one percent of the total capital. : Providence Women's College  
Kozhikode
7. Printing Press : Print O Fast  
Kozhikode, Ph: 0495-2761239

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