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CONTENTS

HYPER-MASCULINITY AND OBJECTIFICATION: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF BHOJPURI SONG VISUAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Bhojpuri music, an essential part of North Indian culture, has transitioned from traditional folk storytelling to a commercialised and digitally driven industry. This study examines how Bhojpuri music lyrics and videos reinforce hypermasculinity and objectify women through a qualitative analysis of music videos. Drawing on feminist media theory, Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, and Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory, this research explores how gender roles are constructed and perpetuated in Bhojpuri music. The study employs a case study approach, selecting popular Bhojpuri songs based on their visual representation and cultural significance. Findings indicate that men are frequently depicted as dominant figures, reinforcing toxic masculinity, while women are objectified through visuals that emphasise their physical attributes. The increasing commercialisation of Bhojpuri music, particularly through digital platforms like YouTube, has amplified these portrayals, shaping public perceptions of gender roles. This paper underscores the social and cultural impact of Bhojpuri music's gender representations and highlights the need for greater media literacy, regulatory interventions, and the promotion of more inclusive and respectful narratives. The study advocates a shift toward gender-sensitive storytelling that preserves Bhojpuri's cultural identity while fostering gender equity.

Keywords: Bhojpuri music, gender representation, hypermasculinity, objectification, male gaze, media influence, digital platforms, cultural identity.

Introduction

Bhojpuri music, a vital component of North Indian cultural heritage, has long been rooted in oral storytelling, folk traditions, and social expression. Originating from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand, it historically served as a medium to preserve cultural values, religious narratives, and rural experiences. Traditionally, Bhojpuri folk songs were performed during festivals, weddings, and community gatherings, addressing themes of love, migration, devotion, and agrarian life. These songs were passed down orally across generations, ensuring the preservation of the region's linguistic and musical heritage (Tiwari 45).

The historical migration of Bhojpuri-speaking laborers during the colonial period contributed to the global spread of Bhojpuri culture. Countries like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, and Suriname became hubs for Bhojpuri music, which absorbed external influences while maintaining its folk essence (Jha 112). By the 1980s and 1990s, technological advancements such as cassette tapes facilitated mass production and distribution, increasing its accessibility and commercial appeal.

In recent years, Bhojpuri music has shifted from being a part of traditional folk traditions to a commercialized industry, shaped by Bollywood-style influences and digital platforms like YouTube and Spotify. While this expansion has broadened its audience, it has also led to criticisms regarding sensationalism, hypersexualized female portrayals, and reinforcement of hypermasculinity, raising concerns about cultural authenticity and socio-cultural impact (Verma 78).

The research paper aims to:

1. Analyse how Bhojpuri music reinforces hypermasculine ideals by depicting men as dominant and aggressive figures through lyrics and visuals.

2. Examine the objectification of women in Bhojpuri music by identifying patterns in camera work and performance aesthetics that reduce women to physical attributes.

3. Assess the socio-cultural impact of these portrayals on gender perceptions, relationships, and societal norms, particularly in the digital era.

Theoretical Framework

Media representations play a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions of gender, identity, and power structures. Bhojpuri music, both as a cultural form and a commercial industry, reinforces these dynamics through its portrayal of hypermasculinity and female objectification.

Theoretical frameworks such as Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory, Gerbner and Gross's cultivation theory, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality provide insight into the gendered narratives prevalent in Bhojpuri music.

Mulvey's male gaze theory explains how media frames women as passive objects of male pleasure, granting men visual and narrative authority (Mulvey 11). Bhojpuri music videos frequently depict female performers through fragmented close-ups of their bodies, reducing their presence to physical attributes rather than individual agency.

Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory builds on this, asserting that repeated portrayals of women in sexualised roles contribute to self-objectification, leading to body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). Bhojpuri music videos, particularly in the digital era, reinforce these beauty standards by prioritising provocative dance sequences and attire over artistic agency.

Gerbner and Gross's cultivation theory highlights how repeated exposure to gendered media normalises hypermasculine ideals and patriarchal norms (Gerbner and Gross 21). Bhojpuri music often glorifies male dominance, aggression, and control over women, shaping societal attitudes and perceptions of gender roles. The commercialisation of Bhojpuri music on digital platforms, particularly YouTube, has amplified these portrayals, as algorithm-driven recommendations prioritise sensationalised content, reinforcing gender hierarchies (Ward 350). Intersectionality further complicates gender representation by considering caste and regional identity. Crenshaw argues that oppression must be understood through multiple overlapping social structures (Crenshaw 1241). In Bhojpuri music, women from marginalised caste backgrounds are often hypersexualised, while upper-caste women are portrayed as virtuous and unattainable, reflecting broader socio-political inequalities (Verma 85).

These theories collectively explain how Bhojpuri music reinforces traditional gender norms and contributes to social realities. As Bhojpuri music expands digitally, its influence on gender perceptions grows, emphasising the need for greater media literacy, ethical content creation, and gender-sensitive storytelling to challenge patriarchal narratives while preserving regional cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis combined with a case study approach to examine the representation of hypermasculinity and the objectification of women in Bhojpuri music. This paper seeks to identify recurring themes, visual patterns, and their broader socio-cultural implications by selecting a sample of five Bhojpuri songs and their corresponding music videos. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select five Bhojpuri songs based on specific criteria. The selection process considers songs of Khesari Lal Yadav posted on YouTube between 2015 and 2025, ensuring that they have significant viewership on YouTube and other digital platforms. The songs chosen explicitly depict gendered themes such as hypermasculinity and female objectification, with visuals prominently featuring male dominance, the male gaze, and stereotypical gender roles.

Data collection and analysis involve one level of qualitative examination of the visual analysis of music videos. The visual analysis focuses on cinematography techniques, including camera angles, close-ups, and framing of male and female characters. Using Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory, this study assesses whether women are sexualised, objectified, or positioned as passive figures in the videos. Deductive coding will be used to categorise key visual themes such as male dominance, voyeurism, and costuming choices.

Visual Analysis of Songs

The Bhojpuri song लहंगालखनऊआ *(LEHENGA LUCKNUWA)*, posted by the Adishakti channel on March 3, 2020, has amassed over 357 million views and 1.2 million likes on YouTube, reflecting its immense popularity. The visual elements of the music video present a distinct gender dynamic that aligns with theories of the male gaze, objectification, and media influence. The cinematographic techniques used in the video highlight the contrasting representations of the male and female leads. The male character in the song is fully clothed throughout the video, maintaining a dominant and composed presence, while the female lead is dressed in a lehenga-choli, a traditional outfit that is framed in ways that emphasise her midriff, chest, and facial features. The camera angles frequently focus on specific parts of her body, particularly through close-ups of her stomach, chest, and nose ring, reinforcing fragmentation and selective objectification. These performances support Mulvey's male gaze theory, which argues that mainstream media frequently constructs women as passive objects of visual pleasure for a heterosexual male audience (Mulvey 11).

The dance choreography further reinforces gendered portrayals. The movements highlight the female lead's upper body, particularly emphasising chest and stomach movements. Meanwhile, the male lead directs the narrative through actions such as giving a flying kiss, an act that signifies his control over the interaction while positioning the female as the recipient of his gestures. The presence of male backup dancers, who wear nose rings, adds an element of playful subversion but does not disrupt the overall framework of gendered power relations. These dancers remain secondary figures, while the primary male-female dynamic continues to reinforce male dominance and female objectification.

The song's lyrics also contribute to gendered portrayals by complementing the visual elements with suggestive metaphors and descriptions that place the focus on the female body. The repeated emphasis on physical attributes in both lyrics and cinematography aligns with Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory, which states that continuous media representations of women in sexualised roles lead to self-objectification and the internalisation of external scrutiny (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). This phenomenon can contribute to psychological effects such as body dissatisfaction and anxiety, particularly when such portrayals are normalised in mainstream entertainment.

The song's overwhelming reach, facilitated by digital platforms such as YouTube, may further intensify this impact by ensuring that these representations are widely consumed and internalised.

Cultivation theory, proposed by Gerbner and Gross, suggests that repeated exposure to specific media themes influences audience perceptions of reality. In the case of लहंगालखनऊआ, the repeated portrayals of hypermasculinity and female objectification reinforce societal norms that normalise male dominance and the reduction of women to aesthetic objects (Gerbner and Gross 21). Given the high viewership and likes of the song, such portrayals become embedded in cultural consciousness, shaping real-world attitudes toward gender roles. The widespread acceptance of these representations raises concerns about the long-term impact of Bhojpuri music on gender perceptions. While the video includes elements of traditional aesthetics, the overarching visual and lyrical choices prioritise sensationalism over nuanced representation.

The next Bhojpuri song, *Nathuniya*, performed by Khesari Lal and Priyanka Singh, premiered on May 2, 2022, on the Saregama Hum Bhojpuri YouTube channel. With over 502 million views and 2.3 million likes, its widespread reach highlights its cultural and commercial significance. The camera work in *Nathuniya* is designed to emphasise the female lead's body parts through fragmented shots, particularly focusing on her legs, chest, stomach, and eyes. While the male lead is fully clothed, maintaining an authoritative presence, the female lead is dressed in an Indo-Western *Lehenga* (skirt) with a high slit, revealing her left leg. The close-up shots of her body reinforce visual fragmentation, a method used to objectify women by reducing them to isolated physical features (Mulvey 11). The seductive dance movements, particularly leg and chest emphasis, further establish the female performer as a visual spectacle rather than an equal participant in the performance.

The choreography and gender dynamics further reinforce male dominance and female objectification. The male lead's actions, including flying kisses and a soft kiss, establish his control over the interaction, while the female lead's response through seductive gestures and leg movements reinforces a passive and desirous role. The male lead throwing money at the female lead using a machine symbolises an imbalance of agency, suggesting that her actions enhance his dominance rather than assert her independence. Additionally, the backup dancers consist of more men than women, reinforcing a male-dominated performance space where women's roles remain secondary and ornamental.

The lyrical content of the song also supports gendered power structures, complementing the visuals with suggestive metaphors that prioritise physical attraction over narrative depth. According to Fredrickson and Roberts's Objectification Theory, such portrayals contribute to self-objectification, where women internalise external scrutiny and evaluate themselves based on their physical appeal (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). In *Nathuniya*, the camera's focus on body parts, stylised clothing, and sensual dance moves reinforces beauty standards that centre on performative femininity, aligning with objectification theory's concerns about the indirect psychological consequences of such portrayals.

Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory suggests that repeated exposure to specific media themes shapes audience perceptions of reality (Gerbner and Gross 21). Given that *Nathuniya* has amassed over 500 million views, its widespread digital consumption normalises hypermasculine and objectified portrayals of gender. The algorithmic amplification of such content on platforms like YouTube ensures that these representations reach larger audiences, embedding them into mainstream cultural consciousness. Furthermore, the act of throwing money at the female lead while the female lead performs sensual movements reinforces the commercialisation of female presence, positioning women as performers whose value is tied to their aesthetic and sensual appeal rather than their agency.

The overwhelming success of *Nathuniya* highlights the need for critical engagement with gendered media portrayals in Bhojpuri music videos. While the regional music industry is rooted in rich cultural traditions, its increasing focus on hypersexualised and male-dominant narratives raises concerns about the long-term impact on gender perceptions.

Similarly, the item song *Pagal Banibe*, performed by Khesari Lal Yadav and Priyanka Singh, premiered on December 18, 2018, on the Zee Music Bhojpuri YouTube channel. With over 438 million views and 1.5 million likes, the song reflects the immense popularity of item songs in Bhojpuri music. The camera angles and visual framing emphasise the female lead's body through fragmented shots, particularly focusing on her legs, chest, stomach, and navel. She is dressed in a lehenga-choli with two slits, exposing her legs and midriff, which the camera frequently highlights through close-ups and slow-motion shots. The seductive facial expressions and body movements, particularly leg moves, belly dancing, and booty shakes, align with the visual tropes commonly used to objectify women as aesthetic spectacles rather than active participants in the narrative (Mulvey 11). Meanwhile, the male lead mirrors some of the female lead's dance moves, including navel-touching and hand movements, but remains in control of the interaction, reinforcing the gendered power imbalance in the song's performance. The choreography and gender dynamics further reinforce male dominance and female objectification. The female lead is surrounded by male dancers, positioning her as the central object of desire, while the male lead engages in direct physical interactions, touching her navel and hands.

The background setting of a mafia-themed orchestra party, where armed men dominate the scene, adds an element of hypermasculine authority, reinforcing power structures that place women in submissive roles.

The presence of a predominantly male audience, including men holding guns, visually communicates an environment of male control and entitlement. Additionally, in the background, two women sit between a man, subtly indicating the passivity and secondary status of female figures in the setting. The lyrical content complements the visuals by reinforcing themes of male dominance and female desirability. According to Fredrickson and Roberts's Objectification Theory, such portrayals contribute to self-objectification, where women internalise external scrutiny and evaluate themselves based on their physical appeal (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). The focus on the female lead's bodily movements, seductive expressions, and costume choices aligns with this theory, reinforcing external validation as the primary determinant of female desirability. Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory suggests that repeated exposure to specific media themes shapes audience perceptions of reality (Gerbner and Gross 21). Given that *Pagal Banibe* has amassed over 438 million views, its widespread digital consumption normalises hypermasculine and objectified portrayals of gender. The algorithmic amplification of such content on platforms like YouTube ensures that these representations reach vast audiences, embedding them into mainstream cultural consciousness. Furthermore, the act of throwing money at the male lead while the female lead performs sensual movements reinforces the commercialisation of female presence, positioning women as performers whose value is tied to their aesthetic and sensual appeal rather than their agency.

The Bhojpuri song, मिलतेमरदहमकेभूलगईलू *(You have forgotten me after getting a husband),* performed by Khesari Lal Yadav and Priyanka Singh, premiered on November 26, 2017, on the Aadishakti Bhojpuri YouTube channel. With over 366.89 million views and 739K likes, the song exemplifies the significant digital reach of Bhojpuri music. Unlike many contemporary Bhojpuri music videos that focus on hypersexualisation and objectification, this song emphasises expressive storytelling, facial movements, and emotional interplay between the male and female leads. The cinematographic techniques, choreography, and gender representation align with aspects of Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory and Cultivation Theory but also diverge from conventional Bhojpuri item songs by prioritising narrative-driven interactions over bodily spectacle. The setting in a park provides a natural and emotionally charged atmosphere, reinforcing the themes of nostalgia, regret, and post-marital longing. The camera angles frequently zoom in on the faces of both the male and female leads, emphasising their expressions of complaint and request, which visually reflect the lyrical conversation. Unlike many Bhojpuri songs, where the camera selectively fragments the female body into isolated shots of legs, chest, and waist, this video shifts the emphasis toward facial close-ups, reinforcing emotional and extramarital storytelling (Mulvey 11).

The choreography remains minimal, focusing on expressive facial movements, hand gestures, and synchronised body language that mirrors the song's narrative. The female lead, dressed in a black one-piece dress, engages in subtle yet playful gestures, reinforcing a contemporary feminine aesthetic while maintaining the traditional cinematic role of a soft, expressive, and emotionally responsive woman. Meanwhile, the male lead exhibits expressions of complaint and dissatisfaction, portraying a relatable theme of post-marital discontent, where a man (her previous boyfriend) feels forgotten after marriage.

This theme aligns with broader Indian cultural narratives that romanticise nostalgia and reinforce the idea that women should continue to validate male emotions even after marriage. Through facial expressions, gestures like the phone sign, and synchronised body movements, the song constructs an interactive dynamic where the male lead voices concerns while the female lead playfully defends herself, reinforcing a gendered dynamic of male longing and female emotional negotiation.

Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory suggests that repeated exposure to specific media themes shapes audience perceptions of reality (Gerbner and Gross 21). In this case, the song contributes to the normalisation of post-marital nostalgia as a recurring emotional theme, reinforcing the idea that women must actively engage in emotional labour to maintain male satisfaction in relationships. The song's success, with over 366 million views, highlights how such gendered emotional themes resonate with audiences, shaping cultural expectations of relational roles. While the song avoids overt female objectification, it still positions the female lead within the traditional role of responding to male dissatisfaction, subtly reinforcing patriarchal expectations. Despite its shift from hypersexualised visuals to expressive storytelling, the narrative ultimately reaffirms male emotional dominance and female responsibility in relationships.

Using deductive coding, the following key themes emerge: gendered emotional dynamics, where the male lead expresses complaint while the female lead engages in playful negotiation; face-centric cinematography, shifting the focus from bodily objectification to emotional storytelling; modern femininity, represented through the female lead's contemporary black dress and expressive gestures; and post-marital nostalgia, reinforcing cultural expectations of women's relational responsibilities. While the song provides a more balanced representation compared to overtly objectifying Bhojpuri item songs, it still subtly reinforces gender hierarchies through emotional framing.

The last Bhojpuri song, *Nimbu Kharbuja Bhayil*, sung by Khesari Lal Yadav, Karishma Kakkar, and Sapna Chahun, premiered on December 11, 2023, on the YouTube channel West Bhojpuri. With over 435 million views and 2.4 million likes, the song demonstrates the continuing dominance of hypermasculine and objectified portrayals in Bhojpuri music.

Through its cinematographic techniques, choreography, and visual framing, the video aligns with Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory, Objectification Theory, and Cultivation Theory; camera work and framing choices consistently emphasise fragmented body shots and focus on reinforcing gendered power dynamics and the commodification of female presence. The female lead's stomach, navel, and facial expressions align with Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and the male gaze (Mulvey 11). The female lead, dressed in a choli with a half-saree skirt, is framed in sequences that prioritise her stomach and navel through slow-motion shots and close-ups. These framing highlights objectification, as her presence is broken down into individual body parts rather than presented as a whole character. The male lead, initially fully clothed, later transitions to a shirtless state, reinforcing the hypermasculine aesthetic of bodily dominance and physical attraction. The repeated shirtless shots, combined with smoking and aggressive postures, establish his dominance in the visual narrative, a common trope in Bhojpuri music videos that portray men as assertive and powerful. The choreography further reinforces gendered dynamics, where the female lead's movements, particularly her stomach and navel move, serve to entice the male lead. She is seen using hand gestures to call him, reinforcing traditional feminine passivity, where the woman invites male attention rather than asserting her agency. The male lead responds by touching her hair, waist, and navel, visually positioning her as an object of his control. In dance sequences, the camera focuses on stomach and chest movements, often in fragmented shots, which are repeated throughout the video. The female lead's kissing the male lead's chest reinforces physical intimacy as a performative act, adding to the commercialised sensuality of the video. The symbolism of smoking, shirtlessness, and physical control further aligns with hypermasculine portrayals, where the male lead is presented as rugged and powerful, while the female lead is positioned as submissive and inviting. Smoking, often associated with dominance and rebellion, visually contrasts with the female lead's stylised presence, reinforcing gendered stereotypes of male authority and female desirability. This contrast is heightened through fragmented close-ups of male chest movements and female body movements, reinforcing the voyeuristic framing that objectifies the female lead while glorifying the male lead's physicality. According to Fredrickson and Roberts' Objectification Theory, continuous exposure to sexually objectified portrayals of women in media contributes to self-objectification, where women internalise external scrutiny and evaluate themselves based on appearance (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). The hyperfocus on the female lead's body parts and intimate physical interactions in *Nimbu Kharbuja Bhayil* aligns with this theory, reinforcing external validation as central to female desirability. Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory states that repeated exposure to specific media themes influences audience perceptions of reality (Gerbner and Gross 21). With over 435 million views, this song exemplifies how Bhojpuri music continues to reinforce hypermasculine ideals and objectified portrayals of women, shaping audience expectations regarding gender norms and relationships.

The algorithmic promotion of such content on digital platforms further normalises these representations, embedding them into mainstream entertainment culture. The overwhelming success of *Nimbu Kharbuja Bhayil* underscores the continued demand for hypersexualised and male-dominant narratives in Bhojpuri music videos.

Major Findings

The analysis of Bhojpuri songs—*लहंगालखनऊआ, नाथुनिया, पागलबनिबे, मिलतेमरदहमकेभूलगईलू*, and *निम्बूखरबूजाभईल 2*—reveals recurring patterns of hypermasculinity, female objectification, and digital amplification of gendered stereotypes. One key finding is that Bhojpuri music consistently constructs and glorifies hypermasculinity by portraying men as dominant figures who control interactions and seek female validation. Male leads are often fully clothed, while female leads are dressed in revealing attire, with fragmented body shots emphasising the stomach, navel, chest, and legs (Mulvey 11). Lyrics frequently romanticise male persistence, aggression, and control over women, reinforcing toxic masculinity (Gerbner and Gross 21). The second major finding is the systematic objectification of women, where camera angles focus on physical attributes rather than female agency. Videos such as *नाथुनिया*and *पागलबनिबे*use voyeuristic framing, reducing female performers to visual spectacles rather than active participants. The third key finding highlights the role of digital platforms, particularly YouTube, in amplifying sexist narratives. Algorithmic recommendations prioritise sensationalised, hypersexualised content, ensuring high engagement and repeated exposure to gendered stereotypes (Fredrickson and Roberts 173).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of Bhojpuri music videos highlights the prevalent presence of hypermasculinity, female objectification, and digital reinforcement of gendered stereotypes. Songs such as *लहंगालखनऊआ, नाथुनिया, पागलबनिबे, मिलतेमरदहमकेभूलगईलू*, and *निम्बूखरबूजाभईल 2* demonstrate that male dominance is constructed and celebrated through both lyrics and visual framing, where men maintain control while women are consistently portrayed as objects of desire (Mulvey 11).

The increasing commercialisation of Bhojpuri music, particularly through YouTube and digital platforms, has amplified these narratives, reinforced voyeuristic representations of women and promoted hypermasculine ideals as aspirational (Gerbner and Gross 21).

To address these concerns, promoting gender-sensitive storytelling and ethical media representation is essential. Encouraging lyrics that depict women as individuals rather than mere objects of attraction can help shift gender perceptions in Bhojpuri music. Additionally, regulatory interventions are needed to monitor and restrict vulgar, misogynistic content, preventing the normalisation of harmful stereotypes. Finally, promoting alternative Bhojpuri music that challenges patriarchal norms by highlighting empowered female narratives, positive masculinity, and diverse storytelling can help reshape the industry. A collective effort from artists, digital platforms, and audiences is necessary to create a more inclusive and gender-equitable regional music culture.

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THE ROLE OF INDIAN MUSIC IN DEFINING CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Music serves as a powerful force that connects us to our cultural and personal experience, to our cultural heritage, and to the change in our social bonds, which plays an essential role in shaping our society. While talking about Indian music, it means that music plays a vital role in defining cultural narratives by preserving the country's history, identity, and spiritual heritage. In this paper, I would be throwing light on how different music from India plays a role in defining cultural narratives and social change. To say, music is a way to connect with ancestors and cultural roots and to express the soul of India. I would be taking Rajasthani and Gujarati music in order to show how Indian music defines cultural narratives and how they tend to bring a social change. Music, knowingly or unknowingly, has the rare capacity to address social and political issues beyond its entertainment value, acting as a catalyst for change and increasing public awareness. Psychologically, people have always found music significant in their lives, as it allows people to regulate their emotions and feelings; it also works as a healing process. Therefore, in this paper we shall be going through different Indian music and showing how they play an essential role as a cultural narrative and as a social change in the society. Through the creation and engagement of music, the culture and social change are very much visible in the society. It is one of the mediums to influence, to share stories, to express identities and to preserve traditions. It will throw light on how different music from different cultures plays an essential role in everyone's lives as a cultural narrative.

Keywords: Cultural Narratives, SocialChange, Rajasthani and Gujarati Music, Psychologically.

Introduction

Music is one of the ideas which is used as a medium for social change, and while comprehending the role of music in India for social narratives and social change is vital because it allows us to see how songs and music have the remarkable ability to evoke emotions, recall memories, and most importantly, to shape our understanding of the world and ourselves. To say, music has always been a powerful force in shaping cultural identity, serving as a reflection of societal values, traditions, and beliefs. As societies evolve and cultures interact, music continues to play a crucial role in defining who we are and how we see the world. Therefore, through the creation and engagement with music, we participate in a dynamic process of self-discovery and expression, which contributes to the continuous evolution of social narratives and social change. As music is deeply embedded in every culture and society, which keeps on evolving over time yet remains an inseparable reality of human existence. By preserving and transmitting the stories, emotions, and values of a generation, music sustains cultural continuity and fosters social narratives and social change. Therefore, in order to know about it more in depth, let us look at the music of India, which has been taken in reference to other cultures, and the music of Indian states, which teaches us about how it sets cultural narratives and indulges in a journey of social change. Music has always played a crucial role in the expression of cultural identity throughout history. It is a powerful tool that has been used by different cultures to tell stories, pass down traditions, and express emotions. From the rhythmic drum beats of Asia and the haunting melodies of Asia to the complex harmonies of Europe, each culture has a unique musical language that embodies its spirit and values. The historical significance of music lies in its ability to transcend barriers and unite people, reflecting the diversity and richness of human experience. Therefore, understanding the role of music in different cultures can provide a deeper insight into their history, beliefs, and ways of life.

The Role of Musicin Cultural Narratives

Traditional music plays a pivotal role in preserving and expressing cultural identity. It acts as a living history, reflecting the values, struggles, and experiences of a community. This music is passed down through generations, which helps to keep traditions alive and fosters a sense of belonging. It provides a unique medium to communicate cultural narratives, strengthening ties within the community and promoting cultural pride. In essence, traditional music serves as a vibrant thread, weaving together the rich tapestry of a culture's heritage, ensuring it continues to thrive and resonate with future generations.

Music as a Means of Communication: Breaking Language Barriers

Music indeed plays a crucial role in cultural expression, serving as an effective means of communication that transcends language barriers. It has the power to evoke emotions, convey ideas, and share stories without the need for understanding the specific words or language used in the song.

Even if the lyrics are in a foreign language, the rhythm, melody, and emotions carried by the music can still be felt and understood. The universal understanding makes music a vital tool in connecting different cultures and fostering mutual understanding among people around the world.

Through music, we can share and understand the experiences, emotions, and narratives of cultures different from our own; thereby, the oppressed voices of society can be conveyed through music.

The Influence of Music in Shaping Cultural Norms and Values

Music plays a crucial role in shaping cultural norms and values. It's not just a form of entertainment but a powerful tool for cultural expression, reflecting and influencing societal attitudes. For instance, music can challengestereo types, encourage empathy, and promote understanding among diverse groups. It can also shape our perceptions of gender roles, relationships, and social issues. Through lyrics, rhythm, and melody, music communicates values and traditions, helping to preserveour culturalheritage. In essence, music is a culturalmirror, mirroring thevalues, issues, and experiences of the society in which it is created.

TheRole of Musicin Cultural Integration and Diversity

Musicplays apivotalrole in promoting cultural integration and diversity. Itserves as a universal language that transcends geographical boundaries and socio-cultural differences. Regardless of language, race, or ethnicity, people can connect and communicate through music. It provides a platform for different cultures to interact, share, and appreciate each other's uniqueness. Music also helps in preserving and propagating cultural identities, ensuring that traditions and heritage arecarried forward to future generations. Thus, musicnot only fosters unity and harmony among diverse cultures but also enriches our global society by showcasing the richness of cultural diversity.

Rajasthani Folk Music

Rajasthani folk music is one of the Indian music that throws light on cultural narratives. Rajasthan is the largest state of India in terms of area. It is gifted with a great history, scenic beauty, magnificent forts and palaces, colourful fairs and festivals, a vibrant culture and living traditions. The desert musicians and nomadic communities of Rajasthan are, by now, known all over the world. The Langas, the Manganiyars, and the Kalbelias have widely travelled all over the world and mesmerised the audiences both in India and across the world. In addition to the songs of these professional caste performers and many more, there are numerous songs in the repertoire of Rajasthani folk music which have been circulating in different popular cultural media. The corpus of oral tradition in Rajasthan is probably the largest in the country. Rajasthan is, without doubt, not only the most colourful but also the most musical state in India. Each region of Rajasthan has its own distinctive style of folk entertainment and musical instruments, songs and music, which sometimes overlap, as in the case of neighbouring regions, or some songs and melodies which almost all the people of Rajasthan have adopted and improvised. The music of Rajasthan stands as a testimony to the fortitude of the people of Rajasthan, who braved the adverse environmental conditions to create for posterity the image of Rajasthan as a colourful land of mellifluous music. Kishore Singh, in Golden Rajasthan, reminds his readers, at the very outset, of "the very real heroism and tenacity of a people who tamed their hostile environment, creating beauty from the rock and sand of barren lands and developing a code of living that was as implacable as the desert in which they lived." Before proceeding any further, the contribution of Komal Kothari in the discovery, preservation, and promotion of the rich folk forms and cultural heritage of Rajasthan has to be acknowledged. Or, to put it differently, one can say that since any research on the folk music of Rajasthan (or, for that matter, any other cultural aspect of Rajasthan) has to, as a matter of necessity, rely on his extensive fieldwork on the cultural aspects of Rajasthan, the present study on Rajasthani folk songs and music takes the knowledge documented by Komal Kothari as its point of departure. Sharma has rightly outlined the role of the renowned ethnomusicologist Komal Kothari in the survival of Rajasthani folk songs and music to this day. She writes: They [Rajasthani folk songs and music] would have remained inconspicuous to the outside world had not Komal Kothari, a great connoisseur of folk arts, discovered their talent. Realising that this oral tradition might go extinct if no steps were taken to preserve it, he documented the art and the artists, and thanks to his efforts, a group of artists rose to fame, and the melodious voices of the Thar began to enthral audiences far and wide. For the first time, the Langas and the Manganiars stepped out of the boundaries of their villages to sail across the globe. Komal Kothari recalls that the unconscious process of thinking about folk songs started in the year 1953 (in Detha 11, translation mine). Later, he was appointed as the secretary of Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1958. Now, he had to primarily engage in work related to music. He decided that he would collect the folk instruments of Rajasthan and detailed information of the same. These instruments were only played in the villages and were not available in the marketplaces. Komalda explains that in those days, tape recorders were not available for ordinary people.

Gujarati Folk Music

Carans who promote a musical identity for their caste (for example, J.G. of Rajkot) say that their fathers sang, as did their fathers before them, and insist that there have always been Carans who sang. One of the most popular recording artists and performers of Gujarati folk songs in the 1950s and 1960s was a Caran, Hemubhai Gadhavi. Moreover, a number of Carans continue to be successful professional performers, mixing traditional Carani verses with popular renditions of folk songs.

Thus, in part, the question is moot: Some Carans are professional singers. Nevertheless, how long Carans have been "professional" singers remains unclear.

Stutley and Stutley suggest that in ancient India, Carans were "perhaps singers" and "probably wandering minstrels, who were later employed at the courts of kings" (1977:60a). And Monier-Williams cites several ancient sources which describe Carans as singers (1899:393b). However, little historical evidence can be drawn upon to determine whether Carans were professional singers of overtly musical genres during the period from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. Forbes quotes a passage from the Prithvirajraso, an oral epic poem concerning the exploits of the mediaeval Rajput warrior-king, Prithviraj, that suggests music may have been a part of the Caran's role. Forbes notes that when Prithviraj defeated a rival Rajput, BhimdevChalukya, "Charuns and Bhats sang the praises of Prutheeraj" (1924 [1856] 1:221). The use of "sang" here would seem more than simply poetic licence. Forbes was very familiar with Carani Sahitya and would have realised if he was treading on sensitive ground with such a statement. Furthermore, when the Gujarati poet/scholar Udayaram rendered the original verse in the Gujarati edition of Forbes's book, he used the Gujarati verb "to sing" to translate the passage. An apparent rise in the importance of Carans as singers of regional music seems to coincide with a decline of the feudal states and estates of the region and a growing interest in folk music. An important factor has to be the Hindu revivalist movements dating from the mid-nineteenth century, which were very important among the Gujarati middle class and which in part inspired an interest in traditional regional culture. But whether singing Carans first appear during this period or whether their presence is more readily acknowledged than before cannot be known at this time. More important to many Carans (though usually unspoken) than whether or not Caran forebears were singers is whether or not they were professional singers. In the eyes of Carans who dispute the role of singing in their caste's identity, regional professional musician castes (such as Larighas and Mirs) occupy a much lower rank than Carans. The reasoning of these Carans is based on the roles of musicians in the old royal courts, where singers and instrumentalists were invited to entertain in the rajdarbar (royal audience hall/royal audience) but seldom to stay and offer advice. Carans, by contrast, are described historically as the confidants of their patrons, sometimes acting as oral couriers delivering poetic salutations or maledictions to other rulers. They are often described as regaling Gujarat's royalty with stories recounting the bravery, loyalty, and power of the ancestors of the hosts. Carans who claim that the presentation of Carani Sahitya is unmusical observe that the hallmarks of the professional musician – knowledge and performance of ragas and talas – are unnecessary to present epic poetry. Here enters the question of whether or not Carani's presentation is musical. Part of the problem lies in the different definitions of "singing" held by various factions of the caste. Cultural definitions of music are often at their most interesting when they reflect disagreements within a community. The breadth or narrowness of the definition is a function of social and cultural context (Nettl 1983:15-25). Sometimes definitions are drawn from the precepts of an official ideology (see, for example, Faruqi 1985:6ff). Sometimes a distinction between speech and song is not clearly drawn (see, for example, Nketia 1974:177-88). Ethnomusicologists themselves are increasingly confronting their own perceptions and conceptions of things "musical" and comparing them with those of the individuals whom they study (Nattiez 1990:41-68). Not all Carani sahitya is presented in a manner that traditionally (in both the Euro-American or the Indic sense) could be confused with singing. Some presentations of Carans sahitya are straightforward spoken storytelling in which poems may occur. Still, some poems – verses which are particularly poignant in the context of the story – are commonly intoned in a style that is described by certain Carans as in a "high voice" (using the English words) or a mot! Vani ("big voice") and by other Carans as "singing". And Carans are not the only participants in this process. Even Carans who claim that what they do is not singing are interpreted otherwise by most Gujarati audiences.

Gujarati Caran poetry is usually presented in melodically predictable Dhals (melodic matrices) in a sequence of free-time couplets (duha) followed by extended verses (chand) presented in a pulsed, rhythmic, and often rapid-fire manner. Although performers often stop to interject an exegesis, the format is remarkably like that of the unpulsed-pulsed musical sequence prevalent in a wide variety of South Asian music (for example, the alap-jor sequence of North Indian classical instrumental music). Some Carans suggest that perhaps their ancestors sang verses, but that they were – to use Sachs' phraseology – "singing professionals" and not "professional singers" (1962:200).

In other words, their principal occupation was creating poetic accounts for their patrons, and as part of this duty, they controlled a modest vocabulary of musical skills to present these verses.

The Bdhals used with duha and chand were part of this repertoire. Gujarati folklorist Zaverchand Meghani, who collected the texts not only of many Caran stories and poems but also of regional folk songs, explains that the term "git" ("song") is misleading when applied in the context of Caramn sahitya (1943:48). He suggests that what is intended is a kind of chant (path) or "recital" (inserting an English word into his Gujarati text). The word "gi' is utilised in Carani sahitya to refer to a prosodic genre.

The word "path" has associations with Vedic chant (patha); however, why did Meghani describe the presentation as a "recital," going as far as inserting the English word in Roman script into his Gujarati text? I suggest he did so for several reasons, one of which is that he realised that some Carans (probably the most influential Carans in royal preindependent India, where and when he was writing) were uncomfortable with the characteristic of "singing" being applied to their activities.

He therefore borrowed a concept and a word from English which had no previous associations for him and his readership; he brought in a new term which satisfied most conservative Carans but which would have been largely incomprehensible to nonspecialists reading the book. Readers for whom this word had no reference would have been able to create a new aural cognitive category somewhere between spoken recitation and singing. I am not suggesting that Meghani was purposely misleading, only that his inclusion of a non-referenced word reflects his own uneasiness with the description. The Sanskrit word git is associated primarily with singing and secondarily refers to poetic metre. Even as a category of prosody, the term possibly reflects an era when the meter had additional musical implications. To add to Meghani's problem, Carani git is presented in a rhythmic and pitched way that many of his contemporaries (although probably not all Carans) would have understood as a form of musical presentation.

The Effect of Music in Social Change and Social Narratives

The idea of using music and music education for social change is not a novel concept. In all respects, famous philosophers, like Aristotle and Plato, deliberated on the favourable and unfavourable impact of music on separate identities and mankind. (Rinholm&Varkoy, 2020) Many intellectuals' associate music with the idea of a flourishing society and view it as a fallback for social transformation, leading to the belief that social transformation is always positive, even when it isn't. (Boeskov, 2018) In recent decades, the field of music education has experienced significant advancements in literature and media reports, recognising the power of music to transform individuals and society, enhance cognitive, social, and emotional abilities, and foster integration among people from diverse backgrounds. Changes in social relations are closely linked to the concept of social change. (Strood & Corbin, 2008) inside a society or community as a whole. (Kertz-Welzel, 2022) Strong & Corbin (2008): Social transformation encompasses the changes in systems within the construction of society, differentiated by modifications in conventions of conduct, cultural representations, appraisal systems, and social configurations. (Wilterdink & Form, 2020). Context roots the concept of social change, which encompasses various goals and meanings related to the cultural, economic, or sociopolitical situation in a society. According to Aristotle, immersing in music, whether produced or listened to, was a way to obtain spiritual rejuvenation, insight, and pleasure. (Elliot & Silverman, 2016) Furthermore, Aristotle, the esteemed philosopher, argued that music serves as a catharsis, a cleansing process that alleviates overwhelming feelings or moods, thereby tranquilising one's emotions (Stamou, 2002). As stated by Juliet Hess (2019), producing music entails skills that are social, sentimental, communicative, and political, which are fundamental to the practice of music. This leads to the emergence of music's advocacy for social equity as a fundamental aspect of music production. According to Benedict et al. (2015), Gould et al. (2009), and Hess (2019), music's support for social equity has emerged as a basic feature of music production.

Conclusion

To say, if one listens carefully through its features, folk music can convey an array of information or complex concepts that, through time, become vital knowledge for the local community that has preserved it. For instance, the rhythm within the song can communicate the action being or meant to be performed in the song. Working songs are a category of folk songs designed to be performed and often are in sync with the breathing, movement, and other components that accompany a certain task. This could include weaving, farming, the pounding of rice, or other tasks (Maliangkay 53). The rhythm and the performance of these songs can showcase the knowledge that it takes in order to perform a certain duty successfully. As mentioned before, a folk song could teach the listeners the appropriate pace for pounding rice so as not to mess up or fall behind with such an intricate task. Not only that, but folk music can convey convoluted social concepts like social stratification or complex social networks, as well as addressing concerns in the local community and the impact of culture at large.

This can be reflected in Korean folk music, which often has pointed out the toll that may come with abiding strictly to Confucian morals and the social divisions within it that may add further strain on an individual or community. For example, there is a Korean folk song that describes and condemns the high and crushing expectations that are put on a wife by her parents-in-law (Maliangkay 61). The listeners of this song are able to understand and form ideas about the Confucian system and how even those who know this system well may still struggle with practising it.

This song also creates a sense of belonging for those who may feel outcast by the high demands of this philosophy and social system. Additionally, this music may be a way for many to cope with these hardships. This conveys how folk music can help people understand their struggles and emotions, find ways to deal with them, and also find community support through songs like these. In other cases, however, folk music has been utilised as a way to spread awareness and solidify societal rules and to discourage social deviance.

Many traditional Nigerian cultures have relied on folk music as a way for their people to keep track of their obligations and to teach them the consequences of immoral or forbidden behaviour. It is in this way that folk music can function as an unofficial code of law (Nzewi, Meki, 1980). Yet, the purpose of folk music is not only to pass down knowledge but also to preserve it. There are groups of people who lack a written tradition and thus rely on oral tradition or other means to preserve their history and customs (Gunara et al., 2022).

This can also be a reliable tool of preservation since documents and artefacts can deteriorate over time, but people and their predecessors can revitalise their songs and stories. These concepts can be observed within the Kampung Naga and other Indonesian indigenous communities, who use folk music to share and preserve their cultural values with each future generation (Gunara et al., 2022). Folk music can also act as a bridge that connects people to culture but also to the natural world. In Serbian culture, among other groups around the world, animal mimicry has been an important component of their folk music tradition. Such a component acts as a tool to pass down knowledge about the surrounding fauna, as well as to symbolise the importance of nature, but in some instances, it has been used as a hunting technique to lure animals (Petrovic, M. &Ljubinkovic, N., 2011). Overall, the functions of folk music are endless, and it has been used by diverse groups of people throughout history in similar or unique ways to share valuable knowledge and lessons. The many human experiences and stories embedded in this timeless form of communication prove to be just as valuable as any piece of empirical data.

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SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND IDENTITY THROUGH BLOGGING: DISABILITY EXPERIENCE IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

Popular culture which critically reflects the power politics, growing ecological concerns, the impacts of crime and violence, negative social implications and dangers of drug abuse, as well as identity-related conflicts faced by marginalised communities, has the power to influence or transform the widely accepted social perceptions and attitudes and even shape the values and behaviour of the youth. Blogging as a part of popular culture offers people from diverse social, cultural, political, economic and identity backgrounds a platform to reflect the social realities with authenticity to a wide range of audiences. Holly Tuke, a twenty-nine-year-old visually challenged girl from Yorkshire who won the Social Media Influencer of the Year award at the RNIB See Differently Awards 2019, uses her blog to be a platform that provides people with advice and support on different aspects, including accessibility, vision impairment and disability.

Drawing insights as a visually challenged person, this paper makes an attempt to examine the role of blogs in shaping public perception and identity through the real-life experiences of disabled people, particularly focusing on the blog writings of Holly Tuke with disability identity. It also aims to explore how such authentic expressions in popular culture challenge the dominant stigmatised representations of disability identity in different spheres, including mass media, thereby ensuring inclusivity and cultural diversity.

Keywords: blogging, disability identity, popular culture, public perception, real life experiences.

The intersection of disability, identity and popular culture in shaping public perception has long been a focus of critical analysis. Scholars such as Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, as discussed by Katie Ellis, emphasise that mainstream media often relies on simplistic portrayals of disability to provoke strong emotional reactions, particularly fear or discomfort. These representations, they argue, promote harmful stereotypes that frame disability as a source of tragedy or threat, ultimately constraining societal understanding of diverse disabled experiences. In contrast, media theorist Henry Jenkins challenges the notion that emotional engagement and critical thought are mutually exclusive. He suggests that popular culture's effectiveness hinges on its ability to evoke emotions, which can then serve as a gateway to deeper reflection. By reworking familiar narratives and experimenting with existing cultural frameworks, Jenkins argues that popular media can prompt audiences to question entrenched assumptions. This dynamic between emotional resonance and critical discourse becomes particularly significant in digital spaces like blogging.

Blogs, as participatory platforms, enable disabled individuals to challenge traditional media narratives by sharing personal stories that intertwine lived experiences with broader sociopolitical analysis. Through these narratives, bloggers counteract reductive stereotypes and try to replace fear-driven tropes with authentic, multifaceted depictions of disability. Such storytelling not only promotes empathy but also invites audiences to critically engage with deep-rooted ableism. In this context, blogging emerges as a powerful medium for reshaping cultural narratives. By centring disabled voices, these platforms disrupt the passive consumption of stereotypical imagery and instead prioritise authenticity and self-representation. Drawing on Jenkins's assertion that emotion drives meaningful reflection, blogs utilise affective storytelling to redefine public perceptions of disability. In doing so, they illustrate how participatory popular culture can transcend mere entertainment, becoming a tool for advocacy and identity construction.

Popular culture which critically reflects the power politics, growing ecological concerns, the impacts of crime and violence, negative social implications and dangers of drug abuse, as well as identity-related conflicts faced by marginalised communities, has the power to influence or transform the widely accepted social perceptions and attitudes and even shape the values and behaviour of the youth. Blogging as a part of popular culture offers people from diverse social, cultural, political, economic and identity backgrounds a platform to reflect the social realities with authenticity to a wide range of audiences. Holly Tuke, a twenty-nine-year-old visually challenged girl from Yorkshire who won the Social Media Influencer of the Year award at the RNIB See Differently Awards 2019, uses her blog to be a platform that provides people with advice and support on different aspects, including accessibility, vision impairment and disability.

Drawing insights as a visually challenged person, this paper makes an attempt to examine the role of blogs in shaping public perception and identity through the real-life experiences of disabled people, particularly focusing on the blog writings of Holly Tuke with disability identity.

It also aims to explore how such authentic expressions in popular culture challenge the dominant stigmatised representations of disability identity in different spheres, including mass media, thereby ensuring inclusivity and cultural diversity.

In *Pop Culture Freaks: Identity, Mass Media, and Society*, Dustin Kidd opines that contemporary society is deeply shaped by commercial culture, which perpetuates a cycle of consumption while fostering a persistent sense of dissatisfaction. This dynamic compels individuals to seek newer products, reinforcing capitalist system where cultural goods are commodified. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer termed this system the "culture industry", highlighting its role in mass-producing art and meaning under capitalist frameworks. Unlike folk culture, which arises organically within communities, commercial culture separates production from reception. Audiences passively consume media, interpreting its messages through their own social lenses, while corporations control the narratives that define societal values.

Kidd argues that identity, encompassing race, class, gender, sexuality and disability, serves as a cornerstone of human experience, shaping belonging, exclusion and social hierarchies. While race, class and gender have long been analysed in sociological studies of popular culture, disability and sexuality remain understudied, despite their profound influence on public perception. Disability, in particular, functions as a structural, economic and cultural principle. It defines labour divisions, social group boundaries and cultural norms, yet media representations often reduce disabled individuals to harmful stereotypes.

In his analysis, Kidd highlights Whittington-Walsh's identification of five recurring tropes in portrayals of disability. Firstly, characters with extraordinary talents were seen as "abnormal", such as Dustin Hoffman's mathematical genius in *Rain Man*. These depictions emphasise "otherness" rather than humanity. Secondly, isolation and pathology. Here, disabled individuals are portrayed as biologically inferior and socially withdrawn. Karl in *Sling Blade*, oscillating between institutions and garages, exemplifies this trope. The third trope is self-sacrifice. Here, characters are valorised for overcoming disability through personal struggle, reinforcing the idea that their value lies in resilience rather than inherent worth. In the fourth trope, asexuality and dependence. Disabled characters are infantilised, denied autonomy or romantic feelings. This trope reflects societal discomfort with disabled sexuality. The fifth trope is violence. Here, disability is viewed as inherently dangerous, implying disabled individuals cannot be trusted or socialised.

Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, renowned disability studies scholars, expand this analysis by linking disability representation to film genres. In comedies disability is mocked through "faked impairment". Horror films depict disability as "inborn monstrosity", while melodramas focus on "maimed capacity". However, Snyder and Mitchell note exceptions. Science fiction often integrates disability into social critiques. For instance, X-Men mutants allegorise marginalisation, and cyborgs challenge notions of human-machine boundaries. It reflects assistive technologies' transformative potential.

Kidd mentions the argument of the documentary filmmaker Laura Kissel that mainstream media erases disabled voices, both physically and symbolically. Her work, such as *Campaign for Full Citizenship*, seeks to reclaim disability narratives by highlighting systemic exclusion and advocating visibility. By centring disabled perspectives, documentaries disrupt stereotypes and reframe disability as a lived experience rather than a narrative device. The 2008 film *Tropic Thunder* sparked backlash for its derogatory use of "retard" and the grotesque portrayal of Simple Jack. Disability advocates like Jill Egle condemned the film for perpetuating harmful tropes, illustrating the real-world consequences of dehumanising media. Egle's YouTube critique points to how such representations reinforce stigma, limiting societal acceptance of individuals with intellectual disabilities. In other words, science fiction and disability documentaries offer pathways for nuanced portrayals. Mutants and cyborgs in sci-fi reframe disability as a site of empowerment, while documentaries prioritise authenticity and determination. These genres challenge audiences to reconsider disability through social, rather than purely medical, frameworks.

Holly Tuke highlights the transformative potential of accessible online shopping in a sponsored blog post reviewing Innosearch, an e-commerce platform accessible for users with disabilities. Her narrative points to how blogging functions as a tool for shaping public discourse on disability inclusion while critiquing systemic barriers in digital spaces. She contextualises the challenges disabled individuals face in online retail, such as unlabelled buttons, poor screen reader compatibility and vague product descriptions.

These barriers force many, particularly persons with vision impairment like her, to rely on a limited selection of accessible websites, sacrificing choice and cost efficiency. Innosearch, she argues, disrupts this pattern by offering a streamlined interface with features like AI-generated image descriptions, simplified navigation, and consolidated product comparisons across a large number of retailers. For Tuke, the platform's accessibility features, such as properly labelled links, clutter-free design and an "Ask Innosearch" AI assistant, enable autonomy, reducing reliance on sighted assistance.

A notable feature in her review is the platform's commitment to inclusive design. The "Ask Innosearch" feature, which provides detailed image descriptions and answers product-related queries, exemplifies how technology can bridge accessibility gaps. She emphasises that such innovations not only enhance user independence but also challenge retailers to prioritise accessibility. However, she cautions that platforms like Innosearch should complement, not replace, corporate accountability for digital inclusivity. Her blog post exemplifies how disabled creators use their platforms to advocate for systemic change. By sharing her firsthand experience, she educates non-disabled audiences about accessibility barriers while affirming the value of disability-led solutions. Her collaboration with Innosearch, framed as both a review and critique, reinforces the idea that accessibility is not a niche concern but a universal benefit. Her blog focuses on the importance of amplifying disabled voices in discussions about technology and consumer culture, urging businesses to align with inclusive practices that reflect diverse user needs.

In her blog titled "Your A-Z Guide for Social Media Accessibility", Holly Tuke focuses on the intersection of digital inclusivity and disability advocacy. She offers a practical framework for reshaping public perception of accessibility in online spaces. By compiling actionable strategies, from alt text best practices to the ethical imperative of inclusive language, Tuke challenges creators and brands alike to prioritise accessibility as a non-negotiable aspect of social media engagement. Her guide not only demystifies technical adjustments but also positions accessibility as a cultural responsibility, directly aligning with broader themes of representation and identity in digital popular culture.

Tuke stresses the notion that accessibility must be embedded at every level of content creation. Practical measures such as alt text as well as concise, human-written descriptions of images ensure screen reader users can engage with visual content. Similarly, accurate captions for videos and mindful emoji usage cater to hearing impaired persons with learning disabilities and visually impaired users. These strategies not only enhance usability but also signal respect for diverse user needs. Also, she challenges the notion that accessibility is optional. She further critiques brands for often treating accessibility as an afterthought, urging businesses to integrate it into their social media strategies to avoid alienating disabled consumers.

Tuke's guidelines extend beyond technical adjustments to address cultural attitudes. She emphasises inclusive language, urging creators to respect self-identified pronouns and disability terminology, thereby validating individual identity. This approach aligns with the social model of disability, framing accessibility barriers as societal failures rather than individual deficits. By urging for plain language and readable fonts, she positions clarity and inclusivity as antidotes to the exclusion perpetuated by complex jargon or inaccessible design.

Tuke also highlights how accessibility intersects with popular culture trends. While encouraging participation in viral content, she warns against compromising accessibility. She upholds the view that disabled audiences should not miss out on cultural conversations due to negligent design. Her critique of platforms like Instagram Stories, which lack alt text capabilities, stresses the need for systemic changes alongside individual accountability. Through her blog, she tries to reshape public perception by considering accessibility as a collective responsibility rather than a special provision for a minority category. Her call for "zero tolerance" towards inaccessibility challenges indifference and asserts that inclusive practices reflect genuine care for marginalised communities. For disabled individuals, such advocacy promotes a sense of belonging, affirming their right to participate fully in digital spaces.

In her blog post "How My Perception of Independence Has Changed Over the Years", Holly Tuke chronicles her evolving understanding of independence and challenges societal assumptions about autonomy and disability. Her reflections offer a strong critique of how independence is often narrowly framed for disabled individuals. She highlights the transformative power of redefining self-reliance through personal agency and communal support. She recounts how societal pressures during her childhood equated independence with solitary achievement, framing requests for support as failures. This mindset, though well-intentioned, instilled guilt and self-doubt, pushing her to reject assistance to prove her capabilities. Over time, she recognised the harm in conflating independence with isolation, particularly when comparing her experiences to non-disabled peers who faced no stigma for seeking help.

A pivotal shift occurred as Tuke redefined independence as self-determined collaboration, embracing tools, technology, and human support without shame. She emphasises that true autonomy lies in advocating for one's needs, whether asking for accommodations or choosing methods that align with personal preferences. For Tuke, independence is not a rigid ideal but a flexible practice. Her narrative aligns with broader themes in disability culture, where blogging serves as a platform to dismantle stereotypes and reclaim identity. By confidently sharing her journey, she challenges ableist notions that equate disability with dependency, instead positioning interdependence as empowering. Her story highlights how disabled individuals navigate and reshape societal expectations, asserting that accessibility and support are not barriers to independence but enablers of it.

This perspective contributes to public discourse by reframing independence as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden. Her blog exemplifies how personal storytelling can reshape cultural narratives, promoting empathy and redefining what it means to thrive with disability in a world often designed without inclusivity in mind.

According to Holly Tuke, accessibility transcends legal mandates or technical adjustments. It represents autonomy and dignity and ensures equal participation in society. Her lived experience underscores how accessibility shapes independence, freedom and self-determination. Simple acts like navigating an online store or reading a restaurant menu become gateways to autonomy when designed with accessibility. Without detailed product descriptions or screen-reader compatibility, Holly initially relied on sighted assistance, eroding her ability to make independent choices. Similarly, inaccessible menus force her to depend on others, reinforcing societal assumptions about disability as a state of perpetual dependency. For Holly, accessible design, whether through braille, digital formats or adaptive technology, restores self-confidence and enables her to engage with the world on her terms.

Accessibility also embodies freedom. It allows Holly to pursue education, employment and social connections without systemic barriers. Tools like screen readers empower her to blog, work and communicate independently, activities sighted individuals often take for granted. Yet, gaps in accessibility, such as venues without digital menus or employers unwilling to provide accommodations, exclude her from opportunities readily available to others. These exclusions highlight how accessibility is not merely convenience but a matter of equity. Holly emphasises that equal access promotes inclusion, enabling disabled individuals to contribute meaningfully to society.

Holly's narrative upholds the notion that accessibility cultivates empowerment. By granting her the tools to navigate daily life independently, accessible design instils confidence and reinforces her capacity to thrive. It transforms mundane tasks, like online shopping, into acts of self-reliance, challenging stereotypes of disability as inherently limiting. Holly's advocacy through blogging exemplifies how firsthand narratives can reframe public perceptions, replacing pity or fear with respect for disabled identity. Her stories reveal that accessibility is not a charitable gesture but a cornerstone of social justice and ensures disabled voices shape cultural conversations about stigmatised identity.

The reflections of Holly Tuke on accessibility illuminate its profound role in shaping identity and public perception within digital spaces. Her blog transcends personal storytelling, functioning as a platform to critique systemic ableism and advocate for inclusive design. By centring disabled experiences, she challenges the reductive tropes pervasive in mainstream media, where disability is often framed as tragic or inspirational, and instead positions accessibility as a non-negotiable right. This aligns with broader scholarly critiques, such as those by Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, who argue that media representations of disability frequently prioritise emotional manipulation over nuanced discourse. Yet, as Henry Jenkins notes, popular culture's emotional resonance can also catalyse critical reflection. Holly's blog harnesses this potential and blends raw, affective narratives with calls for structural change to provoke empathy and accountability among readers.

Tuke's emphasis on independence, freedom and empowerment points to how accessibility intersects with identity formation. For disabled individuals, barriers to access are not mere inconveniences but existential threats to self-expression and participation. By reclaiming disability identity through blogging, bloggers like Holly Tuke subvert traditional media's passive and stigmatised representations of disability identity. This participatory approach mirrors Jenkins' assertion that popular culture evolves through iterative engagement with existing frameworks. Disabled bloggers rework dominant narratives, replacing stereotypes with authentic representations that demand recognition of disability as a lived reality, not a metaphor.

In short, Holly's advocacy highlights blogging's transformative potential in reshaping cultural norms. Her stories exemplify how digital platforms democratise representation, enabling marginalised voices to influence public discourse. When accessibility is prioritised, these narratives reach broader audiences, thereby promoting inclusive dialogues that challenge ableist assumptions.

This aligns with the Equality Act 2010's vision of equal access but extends beyond legislation, advocating for a cultural shift where accessibility is embedded in everyday practices.

As Holly demonstrates, inclusive design is not merely about compliance; it is about affirming humanity, ensuring disabled individuals can navigate the world with dignity, choice and autonomy. In doing so, blogging becomes a catalyst for social change, bridging personal experience with collective advocacy to redefine disability within popular culture.

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WOMEN BETWEEN CULTURES: FEMINIST AND POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON BRITISH LITERATURE AND BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Abstract

Gender roles are observed to be traditionally predetermined. Men's and women's duties and roles are assigned to them according to the biological sex that they are born with. However, in the recent scenario, these roles are shifting and evolving according to time. Many cultures in the world still follow a patriarchal system, and under this light, their literature and art reflect this ideology. This qualitative study is conducted to understand the similarities and differences between two varied cultures, namely, British and Indian, through *Lamb to the Slaughter*, a short story written by Roald Dahl, a 20th-century British author, and *Mrs.*, a 21st-century Indian movie. The main aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis and examine the role of the cultures in the depiction of women characters. The central focus of this research paper is: How do the contrasting cultures represent women characters and the roles they perform? To what extent are these cultures similar in their representation, and how is this representation of female characters in British literature and Indian cinema evolving in both the cultures? The significance of this study lies in the stark contrasting historical and cultural evolution and development of both England and India. The paper uses feminist and post-colonial approaches to analyse the themes and narratives of two contrasting cultures and the representation of women.

Introduction

According to the theory of Orientalism put forth by Edward Said, the West has historically constructed the East – especially the Indians (and other Asians) as the 'other'. Most differences in race, skin colour, and traditions have resulted in disparity in both races. Though both cultures have stark historical and cultural differences, they both have dealt with the issue of gender disparity and inequality in their society. Given this shared struggle, this study aims to bridge the gap between these two cultures and examine the similarities through the representation of female characters in British Literature of the 20th century and Indian Cinema of the 21st century. Roald Dahl was a 20th-century British author who primarily wrote children's books and other poems and short stories. While Dahl is primarily known as a children's author, his works also depict unconventional female characters, deviating from their traditional female disposition, which is expected of women in a patriarchal society. He has sketched women characters who are strong, leading, and at times portray evil predisposition, which is contrary to the regular expectation of women in the roles of caregiver. This can be traced back to Dahl's familial influence on him. Donald Sturrock, in Dahl's autobiography, titled *Storyteller: The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl*, stated that "Roald himself was blessed with an extraordinarily strong and influential Norwegian mother, who single-handedly raised him and did much to shape his attitudes" (Sturrock). On the other hand, *Mrs.*, a 21st-century Bollywood film explores the turmoil and domestic hardships endured by a married woman in an Indian household. It is a story of a woman who crumples her own dreams and ambitions and unwillingly adapts to the role of caregiver. Although these texts come from different cultural contexts, both reflect deep-seated issues of gender disparity. Ultimately, this research will highlight both the parallels and divergences in the treatment of gender across these cultures, offering insights into the universal yet culturally distinct ways gender roles are negotiated. For my study, I would be predominantly using the theory of Feminist and Post-Colonial Theory to examine the role of British Imperialism on the Indian Patriarchal system, by critically analyzing the select works. By applying these theories, this research argues that British imperialism has profoundly shaped Indian gender norms, reinforcing patriarchal structures that persist in contemporary Indian society. Through a comparative analysis of *Lamb to the Slaughter* and *Mrs.*, this study will explore how gender roles are constructed, challenged, and negotiated in British literature and Indian cinema, revealing both the historical impact of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for female agency in these cultures.

Literature Review

Studies have been conducted on the representation of female characters in Bollywood cinema as well as the evolution of these female characters from being depicted as caring, loving and subordinate to their male counterparts to these female characters being portrayed as independent, strong and assertive.

From movies like *Dahej* (1950), *Dev* (1970), and *Biwi Ho ToAisi* (1988), where female leads were exemplified for their loyalty and obedience towards their husbands, to witnessing a decade of evolution in movies like *Thappad* (2020)*, Queen* (2013),and *Mardaani* (2014), digressing from the dainty portrayal of women. However, British literature has represented Indian women characters compulsively and majorly in a submissive trajectory. They are often purported to need a rescue from the alleged orientalist, oppressive, patriarchal culture.

Though *Lamb to the Slaughter* does not inherently depict racial hegemony on the female lead, it still portends an oppressive and dominating patriarchal culture of which British imperialism has accused the East.

<center>**I**</center>

Characters' Sketches

Mrs. is an iconic movie, which has done a marvellous job in reflecting the patriarchal ideologies of Indian culture and society. It is a story about Richa, a passionate dancer, getting married and eventually trying her best to adapt to the traditions of her new family, catering to her husband's and her father-in-law's needs. She sacrifices her passion for dancing and gradually becomes a submissive wife drowning in depression. In the end, she takes control of her life, and the movie ends on a positive note for Richa, the protagonist of the movie. Richa, as a female lead in an Indian movie, portrays similar characteristics to Mary Maloney, the protagonist of Lamb to the Slaughter. Both Richa and Mary embody the idealised role of the devoted wife—Richa prioritising Diwaker's needs, including emotionally detached intimacy, and Mary catering to Patrick's domestic comfort. This domestic servitude reinforces their subjugation within patriarchal structures, demonstrating how gender roles transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. Unlike Richa, Mary finds comfort in her role as a housewife, taking pride in her husband's presence. However, this devotion is one-sided, as Patrick Maloney's sudden decision to leave her shatters her idealised perception of marriage. Richa, in contrast, suppresses her passion for dance and conforms to societal expectations but eventually reclaims her independence. Mary is portrayed to be a devoted and dedicated wife, willingly and happily catering to the needs of her husband: "She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides" (Dahl). Drawing these parallels, one can notice that two women characters, belonging to two starkly different cultures, as well as different centuries, resonate with each other's domestic situation.

Judith Butler, in her seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), has given a theory of gender performativity, which states gender consists of duties and roles assigned to the individual which purport no relation to the individual's biological sex, where one enacts a certain kind of performance as expected in the society with relation to the individual's gender. In this context, both Richa and Mary are conforming to their traditional roles as expected of their gender and, consequentially, performing the expectations imposed upon them as wives. Richa's submission to patriarchal rituals and Mary's unwavering devotion to her husband both reflect the cultural scripts they are expected to follow, reinforcing Butler's argument that gender is socially constructed rather than innate. Through this interpretation, it can be deduced that the theory of Gender Performativitycan be universally applied, especially to British and Indian cultures. Feminist critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; revised 2020), theorise a notion that women are often portrayed as either angelic and saintly or rebellious and monstrous. Applying the theory of "angel vs. monster" to the analysis of the characters of the *Mrs.* movie and *Lamb to the Slaughter,* one can interpret that Richa and Mary are depicted as "angels" at the beginning of the stories. Both fulfil the role of caregiver and in the end, they depict a rebellious disposition and descend into a sort of "madness", often considered unconventional in a patriarchal society. Both Mary and Richa initially fit into the "angel" archetype, performing the role of caregiver as expected in a patriarchal society. But their paths diverge when both reclaim their lives in contrasting ways. Richa leaves her husband and pursues her career as an independent woman, redefining herself as a "new woman". In contrast, Mary murders her husband, fitting into a "madwoman" archetype, unconventionally escaping from punishment and reclaiming her life. Ashima Ahmed Saikia has argued that "the discriminating patriarchal society harasses women every day." She states in her research paper that women are depicted as submissive and intellectually inferior to men through various stereotypical dialogues like "*Ja chudiapehen le*" (Go wear bangles) and '*Ladki ki naa me hi haachupahotahai*' (The girl's no means yes), insinuating little to no worth in a woman's opinions or views (Saikia). While there are movies which promote toxic masculinity through their protagonists, like *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023), there is progress observed in depicting more progressive male characters, alluding to feminist ideologies like Sunny from *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) and Deepak Sehgal from *Pink* (2016) in the last decade and now, in depicting a strong female

lead in *Mrs.* (2025). Indian cinema is still in a transition phase from depicting characters with gendered stereotypes to progressive ones.

II

Symbolism

Symbols have played a major role in conveying the above-mentioned representation. One of the major symbols presented in both works is food. Food is often associated with the interplay of power dynamics and societal expectations for women to be the caregivers. In both the selected works, food serves as a symbol of gender performativity (Butler).

The leg of the lamb in *Lamb to the Slaughter* is introduced in the beginning as a form of Mary's love when she is willing to cook for him, consequentially leading to the leg of the lamb serving as a weapon to kill him and eventually Mary giving up the role of caregiver. In parallel, the movie *Mrs.* uses the scenes and clips of food and delicious dishes as the opening of the film. Though there is no single dish used as a symbol in the film, the entire movie is replete with scenes of various dishes cooked by the female characters.

III

Influence of British Imperialism on Indian Patriarchy

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, has given the concept of 'other' in relation to men. She has stated that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (Beauvoir).

Mary and Richa in the beginning are considered as the 'other', perceived as two submissive, weak women under the guidance of men. Eventually, they both challenge the patriarchal ideologies and obligations. Coincidentally, this theory aligns with a post-colonial theory given by Edward Said of the 'Other', in which he states that the West considers the East as the 'Other' (Said). Though in *Lamb to the Slaughter,* no significant application of Orientalist theory can be observed, the story posits an example of Western-gendered stereotypes. However, Richa subverts the Western notion of being the 'other', being perceived as a delicate, helpless Indian woman, by asserting her right over her agency and surfacing as a strong, independent woman in the end.

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, in their paper titled *Gender and Imperialism in British India*, have stated that the British implemented laws for Hindu widows to remarry and other such acts, which helped women take control of their sexuality; nevertheless, they also imposed a law that allowed a person to sue their spouse for refusing to fulfil the marital obligations. (Liddle and Joshi) Though this law was rooted in Victorian legal frameworks, the hypocrisy of British imperialism can be starkly observed through this. The British solidified their hegemony, and considering this significant change and many such others brought about by the British in India, we can deduce the effect implied on the Indian patriarchal system. Thus, it is justified to notice a similar representation of women characters in British and Indian art and literature. This particular action establishes the male dominance that prevails in society. While no such law exists in India anymore, there is a major issue similar to this in the context of marital rape, which is not yet outlawed by the Indian legal system. This issue resonates in the film, where Diwakar, the husband of the lead, Richa, repeatedly forces himself onto her. And when Richa eventually refuses to have marital intimacy, he gets offended and disregards her feelings. This callous disregard for a woman's feelings by a man can also be observed when Patrick indifferently professes to Mary about ending the marriage. Adding to this, there is one prime example which showcases the treatment of female characters by the other male characters in the select works. The way a male character in the film, Richa's husband's cousin, orders Richa to prepare lemon *shikanji*draws a parallel with the way Patrick orders Mary to "sit down", commanding as if one would order a dog. Through this, a juxtaposition can be established between these two instances. These two male characters, Patrick and Diwakar, have a sense of dominance and assertion over a woman's agency and her life, though they belong to two contrasting cultures as well as they both are men belonging to different periods.

Grace Amelia Watts, in her paper, *Can the memsahib speak? A re-examination of the tropes and stereotypes surrounding the Anglo-Indian female during the Indian Rebellion of 1857* has noted that the gendered stereotypes of women as "domestic beings" pervaded in the Victorian period, and women in India refused to confine themselves to these stereotypes (Watts). Also, another researcher named Mrinalini Sinha, in her book *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late 19th Century,* has talked about the terms "Manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali", which were used by the British in the 19th century to legitimise the British imperialist rule and assert British superiority (Sinha). These historical pieces of evidence trace the entrance and influence of British ideologies related to gender into the Indian patriarchal system. Watts mentioned the concept of the 'fallen woman trope', which, etymologically, is an archaic term used in 19th-century Britain to refer to women who have surrendered their chastity and given in to promiscuity. Watts has explained that

the term "fallen woman" was used by the British during the 1857 mutiny to refer to those British women who were rescued from captivity, survived independently or interacted with Indians outside of British supervision, considering they had surrendered their chastity or racial purity.

According to these Victorian values, though this trope was associated with and referred to British women, in the 21st-century Indian patriarchy, it can be considered that the character of Richa in the film fits the "fallen woman" trope introduced by the British. She protests by leaving her husband and starts living independently. However, this "fallen woman trope" is ironic, as Richa's bold decision leads her towards a happy, fulfilling life and saves Mary from an unhappy marriage, though in an unconventional way.

<div align="center">IV</div>

Character Development

Elaine Showalter, in her book, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), introduces a three-phased model in women's literary history in which she explains the literary-historical framework: The Feminine Phase (women writing works under male pseudonyms), The Feminist Phase (women protesting for their rights), and The Female Phase (women exploring their identities beyond patriarchal influence and developing an autonomous literary tradition) (Showalter). This literary theory can be applied to deconstruct the journey of Mary Maloney and Richa in the selected works by understanding the character arcs of the characters evolving from submission to rebellion to self-discovery. In the feminine phase, both Mary and Richa can be seen to be overshadowed by their male counterparts. Mary and Richa serve their husbands, performing the role of caregiver, and being under the wing of their husbands. Later on, Mary protests against her husband leaving her by killing him. Though this seems like an extreme move, it is one marked by Mary taking control of her own life. She plans to escape by plotting an alibi and pretending to be an innocent victim of the miserable situation. Similarly, Richa protests with another extreme action by splashing a bucket of muddy water onto her husband, leaving hurriedly for her parents' house. This marks a significant shift from the Feminine Phase to the Feminist Phase. In the last phase, the female phase, Mary and Richa become independent from male influence. Though no aftermath is described about Mary's life, the way the story ends, with Mary giggling at the end, can signify a happy ending for her. The act of Richa driving when she leaves symbolises her finally taking control of her own life. Richa starts exploring her identity and thriving professionally, and the film ends on a happy note with Richa performing her dance on stage.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Lamb to the Slaughter* and *Mrs.* highlights the evolving representation of women in British literature and Indian cinema. Both works, though emerging from starkly different cultural and historical contexts, depict female protagonists initially bound by traditional gender roles, only to later reclaim their agency in unconventional ways. Mary Maloney and Richa, despite belonging to different time periods and cultural frameworks, resonate with one another in their struggles against patriarchal expectations. Their journeys exemplify how women across cultures have been confined to domestic servitude yet have also found ways to resist, redefine, and reclaim their identities.

Through the application of feminist and post-colonial theories, this study demonstrates how colonial narratives and Victorian gender ideologies influenced Indian patriarchy. The British Empire, while claiming to "liberate" Indian women from oppressive traditions, paradoxically reinforced patriarchal structures through both law and cultural discourse. This colonial legacy continues to shape gender dynamics in contemporary Indian society, as seen in *Mrs.*, where patriarchal norms remain deeply ingrained despite modern feminist progress.

Furthermore, this research underscores the significance of gender performativity, as theorised by Judith Butler, in shaping societal expectations of women. Both Mary and Richa initially conform to the roles expected of them, only to later subvert these expectations. Their transformations align with Elaine Showalter's three-phased model of female literary history, reflecting a shift from submission to protest to self-discovery. Additionally, the study draws attention to the "fallen woman" trope, revealing how societal perceptions of female independence have historically been shaped by patriarchal and colonial narratives.

While progress in gender representation is evident in Indian cinema, with films like *Mrs.* offering more complex and empowering portrayals of women, the transition from rigid gender stereotypes to nuanced, autonomous female characters is still ongoing. British literature and Indian cinema continue to reflect and challenge patriarchal ideologies, demonstrating that the struggle for female agency is both culturally distinct and universally shared.

Ultimately, this study bridges the gap between British and Indian cultural narratives, revealing that despite historical and cultural differences, the fight against gender inequality remains a common thread. By critically examining these narratives through feminist and post-colonial lenses, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how literature and cinema shape, reinforce and challenge societal perceptions of women. As both industries evolve, so too does the representation of women—moving away from subjugation and towards autonomy, empowerment, and self-definition.

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SWIPE, WATCH, REPEAT: THE ADDICTIVE POWER OF SHORT-FORM VIDEOS ON THE BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN (AGES 2 TO 5)

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Abstract

Short video clips on YouTube, Instagram Reels, and Facebook have become the most significant aspect of adults' and young children's lives, changing their media consumption patterns in the growing digital era. Using a method based on qualitative research, this study examines the addictive effects of brief videos on young children's behaviour between the ages of two and five, using the perspectives of Observational Learning Theory (Bandura, 1961, 1977) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978). By employing the observational methodology, this paper aims to uncover the significant impact of short-form videos on children's social behaviour, attention span, and emotional control based on daily consumption. The research addresses the advantages and disadvantages of digital media, pointing to the importance of media consumption with awareness, offering parental advice, and offering methods for striking a balance between digital exposures and engaging, in-person interactions. This study sheds light on how early children's roles in digital media are developing and guides responsible media usage.

Keywords: Short videos, digital media, young children, social learning, behaviour modelling, screen time, Attachment Theory, Observational Learning Theory, parental influence, cognitive development, media consumption, attention span, emotional regulation.

1.Introduction

As the digital era advances, everything changes and becomes more user-accessible. These days, information can be readily obtained from anywhere in the globe via various platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube clips, and others. People's interactions and consumption of different media are greatly influenced by it. Today's digital media impacts many people in both positive and negative ways. Various platforms offer short-form videos featuring a wide range of content. These include videos that are explicit, instructive, awareness-raising, dancing, singing, vulnerable, and much more. These short videos gain popularity across all age groups, including young toddlers and adults. Short videos have evolved into a fast-paced, incredibly captivating format, becoming easily accessible to all users. It explores for the user's interest, making it interesting and time-consuming.

Originally, the trend was intended for older children and adults. However, in the present day, it has gained immense popularity and taken over the lives of young children, especially those between the ages of two and five. In today's technological age, perspectives on short videos vary greatly among individuals, and these videos hold significant influence. Each person has specific goals they aim to achieve, often inspired by these clips from various platforms. Young people and adults aspire to create unique content that can go viral and significantly boost their public profiles. This trend has led many to produce diverse short video content to increase views and subscribers. Additionally, the majority have turned this trend into a source of income, prompting them to create a wide range of video content, including explicit material.

The trend of digital consumption has emerged among young children, making them passive consumers, drawn to bright screens, rapid changes in visuals, repetitive motions, and colourful video games, among other attractions. Most of these patterns are introduced to children through their environment. The primary exposure comes from the screen habits of their parent's, although some children are also provided tablets and smartphones. Once introduced to these trends, young toddlers tend to adopt them as regular habits. This pattern contrasts with traditional television programming, which is more structured and varies significantly from smartphone programming. The increasing use of digital screens has raised concerns about children's development.

Young children of two and five undergo significant changes in physical growth, developmental skills, and relationships with parents and others. This phase is crucial for their physical development, which includes the enhancement of gross motor skills, fine motor abilities, and coordination of body parts, adding to their overall fitness and growth.

During this period, cognitive development advances, enabling children to solve problems, remember information, imitate actions, and sort and categorise objects. Additionally, toddlers make substantial progress in their vocabulary, learn how sentences are structured, and engage in story narration. Social and emotional growth is also essential for their overall development. This stage is vital for learning how to socialise, form connections, manage emotions, and develop language abilities.

Most importantly, it is a time when children participate in imaginative play, which is key to their development. The introduction of digital media to toddlers and preschoolers brings both opportunities and difficulties.

2. Review of literature

HS Varshaa, Shreya K's research paper titled "Impact of Instagram reels on the attention span of creative and analytic thinkers". The research analyses how Instagram Reels influence the attention spans of creative and analytical thinkers. The researcher employed 20 students as a pilot sample. The research results confirm the null hypothesis, demonstrating a difference in the reel's exposure before and after. Aside from attention span, the researchers did not investigate how reels affect children's behaviour.

The study published in 2024 with the title "Impact of Materialistic Instagram Reels on Psychological Distress, Self-esteem, and Life Satisfaction" was written by Shajeha Faruqi, Mehwish Abdullah, Javeria Ehsan, Salima Barkat Ali (PhD), and Rahat Naeem. Around 300 people were chosen for the sampling. Although the primary emphasis of this research has been psychological discomfort and self-esteem, the results indicate no significant influence on life satisfaction. The behaviour of young children in the digital age does not constitute a topic that the researchers focus on in particular. The study also suggests materialistic values concerning mental health.

"Social Media Reels Trend: A Boon or Curse for the Young Adults" is the topic of Ayushi Sharma's 2023 research, in which the researcher details the effects of social media reels on the lives of young adults. The study points out the benefits and drawbacks of using social media. However, the researcher focused on the overall impact rather than explicitly mentioning young children ages two and five. The article sheds light on the invention, the social media set standard, and the addictive potential of digital media.

The literature reviews highlight the complex impact of digital media. While there have been numerous studies on various topics, the behaviour of young children aged two to five has not been thoroughly investigated. Many researchers explore different aspects, but they often neglect key elements related to early childhood development.

3. Theoretical Framework

Young children were drawn in by the dominance of short-form videos and were devoted to screens. But children's actions, emotional growth, and social development are called into doubt by the digital magnetic pull. Observational Learning Theory (Bandura, 1961, 1977) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978), two well-known psychological theories, are used in this study to reveal the addictive potential of digital media. Parent-child connection will be clarified by attachment theory, while digital media-imitation behaviours will be examined using observational learning theory.

4. Methodology

The behaviour, ability to focus, emotional responses, and social influences of young children have all been examined using qualitative research methods. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to gain an in-depth grasp of the research. This study employed a descriptive observational approach to gain insights into how young children are affected by perceived video clips on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The researcher observed 10 toddlers daily in a mixed-age group of two to five years old to gain more understanding and insight. Real-time observation of the subject's behaviour makes it more suitable and trustworthy for the researcher to comprehend the source. The method is grounded in the attachment and observational learning theory, aiming to investigate how children imitate digital behaviours and develop emotional reactions to screen time. The primary focus of the observational study was on young children, two to five years old. Their behaviour, emotional responses, and attention spans were observed while they engaged with short videos.

As it was difficult to conduct interviews with toddlers, parents acted as an additional focus group in this research project. Unstructured interviews with parents were conducted to gain insight into young toddlers' screen engagement, behaviour, attention levels, emotional connections, and social development. Ten parents participated in the unstructured interviews for the research project. These discussions aimed to assess the impact of daily digital exposure on children.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysing through the Observational Learning Theory

Renowned psychologist Albert Bandura was a leading proponent of the observational learning theory, also known as the social learning theory. According to this view, we pick up knowledge by watching and copying others. It might be our socialisation, knowledge, behaviour, or attitude.

He conducted the Bobo Doll experiment to learn more about it and to better understand how youngsters behave. He listed observation, imitation, modelling, and reinforcement as the primary elements. Bandura discusses the many forms of observational learning theory, including verbal teaching, symbolic modelling, and live modelling. Applying this theory, the paper examines how children aged two to five observe and imitate behaviours from short-form videos.

Ten children aged two to five participated in the study. They were naturally observed to demonstrate the effects of screen exposure on their rapid behavioural responses, changes in attention levels after screen time, and attitudes once the screen was turned off. Additionally, an unstructured interview with the parents was conducted to gather information on the toddlers' long-term behaviours, changes over time, and any limitations in their habits.

Bandura identified four primary ways children acquire behaviour: motivation, attention, retention, and reproduction. These four guidelines become crucial in the digital age since media exposure shapes behaviour that may be replicated through social media and reinforced over time, whether animated or real.

Attention is proposed to be the most important concept in this theory. For the kids to mimic the action that is theoretically proposed, they must first pay attention. It was discovered throughout the observation procedure that all ten of the participants' young children instantly turned to the screen as the short videos played, paying close attention to the video and avoiding any outside distractions. Except for two individuals, others were intensely attentive without getting irritated and observed with joy and interest. Some of the kids were more interested in the films and had faster eye movements. Eight out of ten participants express annoyance and dissatisfaction when the parent shuts off the screen, screaming and sobbing for it to turn back on and play short videos. Through the use of captivating sound effects, quick screen changes, and appealing facial expressions, the kind of media exposure causes children's behaviour to become addicted and regulates their attention periods. Children's growing brains become habituated to high-intensity visual and aural stimuli, which makes slower-paced, real-world activities like playing with toys and interacting face-to-face with friends and caregivers difficult.

Following attention comes the retention phase, during which youngsters internalise and remember the behaviour. Retention is more prevalent in this step since kids attempt to recall the behaviour again after witnessing it. Children who view videos repeatedly get more adept at recognising the words, gestures, and actions, leading to verbal and physical mimicry. Some kids saw videos of dances, gestures, and catchphrases, and by seeing one another, nine out of ten participants were able to recollect comparable dance steps and learn how to utter words like "thank you", "waoo", and "let's go", which are frequently used during play.

Another concern concept pertains to reproduction when kids attempt to mimic or replicate the actions or interactions they see in the media. Children's copying of digital information is similar to what they've seen. The Bobo Doll experiment (1961) demonstrates how children's perceptions of the world influence good and bad behaviour. The investigators played short-form recordings of kind expressions while observing youngsters to determine the favourable influence. The participants learnt how to say "welcome", "sorry", and "please" right away after watching. This imitation demonstrates Bandura's theory that kids are more inclined to copy what they observe. The researcher showed aggressive videos to determine the detrimental effect. It was then discovered that several of the participants were yelling loudly with one another. After seeing the video, several of the participants even attempt to replicate the dangerous move. This result lined up with the Bobo Doll Experiment. Certain media exposure is linked to less emotional control, increased impulsivity, and trouble adhering to regulations.

Since toddlers are more inclined to mimic actions they find enjoyable, motivation is essential to the observational learning process. Algorithm-driven content suggestions in the digital realm produce a feedback loop that continuously shows kids videos that are similar to ones they have already engaged with. Because it emphasises the value of particular behaviours or attitudes, this frequent exposure can enhance particular behavioural patterns. Negative reinforcement can also have an impact on motivation. For example, children may become dependent on-screen time for emotional regulation if they use digital material as a coping strategy for boredom, frustration, or anxiety. Children may become dependent on digital media if they often use screens to self-soothe, relax, or escape unpleasant feelings. Over time, this dependence may lead to issues with self-control and a greater addiction to screens.

However, research using the observational learning theory provided insight into the findings that short-form films had both beneficial and harmful effects on children's behaviour, attention span, and social and emotional bonding. Parents can use the planned method to encourage their children to consume media in a healthy, educational, and emotional way.

5.2 Investigating through the lens of Attachment Theory

Studying attachment theory provides valuable insights into how toddlers form relationships with their caregivers in the digital age. John Bowlby (1969) originally developed this theory, and Mary Ainsworth (1978) later expanded upon it, highlighting the significance of early bonding between caregivers and children. This framework suggests that the interactions between parents and children significantly influence social bonding, behaviour, and emotional development.

In today's world, various digital media platforms, such as Facebook short videos, Instagram, and YouTube, affect children's attachment patterns and have a profound impact on their behaviour, social connections, and other aspects of their lives. This study uses attachment theory to investigate how the bond between parents and children is influenced by excessive consumption of short-form videos.

Employing an unstructured interviewing method, the study examines ten children and ten parents, all aged between two and five years.

The research aims to understand how children engage with video clips, how they use videos to manage their emotions, and how parents interact with their children during screen time. The attachment styles of children are assessed before and after exposure to digital media through behavioural analysis, parental interviews, and naturalistic observation.

The bond between parents and children, as well as screen reliance, are the study's most significant findings. Naturally, the caregiver plays a crucial part in helping children develop securely connected traits by providing comfort, reassurance, emotional stability, and guidance when they feel upset. Furthermore, it has been observed that parents frequently give their kids short-form videos to help them feel less distressed if they are fussy, bored, or agitated. During the unstructured interview, some women acknowledged that they switch on YouTube videos for their kids instead of offering those hugs or verbal consolation when their kids disrupt their work or cry and feel irritated. This is consistent with the idea of insecure attachment, in which parents do not create a strong bond with their children. Rather than using digital diversions as a source of emotional support, they begin to mimic other mechanisms.

Children's usage of short videos as a tool for emotional control rather than ignoring their co-regulation was frequently seen in the research. Eight of the ten people were seen to be hyperactive, upset, agitated, and having trouble settling down while not using the screen. One mother described how her five-year-old daughter would struggle after the screen was turned off for bedtime, displaying extreme annoyance, resisting sleep, and growing more nervous and even making angry facial expressions to parents, copying the behaviour from reels. This was noted during the natural observation process. This finding aligns with the attachment theory's focus on emotional stability. An anxious attachment style that is reliant on screens rather than interpersonal relationships and emotional stability is developed when children's emotions are replaced with digital content for comfort.

To get insight into children's behaviour, it became crucial to examine parents' digital media consumption. Three parents used to interact with their children while watching short educational videos out of ten parent-child pairings. This indicates how children's positive attachment to their caregivers results in balanced screen scheduling and less discomfort following screen time. The remaining seven parent participants exhibit lower attachment behaviour, including decreased eye contact, fewer in-person communications, and a preference for digital contacts over in-person interactions. They also leave their kids alone with the screen open, so as not to disturb them while they are working. These highlights toddlers require an emotionally present caregiver to form stable bonds, which is consistent with the idea of responsive caregiving in attachment theory. Through this process, kids might develop avoidant attachment behaviour, increasing preference for solitary digital engagement.

Parent-child and social connections are negatively impacted by overuse of digital media. Children often actively seek verbal and nonverbal contact from their parents or other adults in their immediate environment, participating in play and conversation. Additionally, children who spend a lot of time on screens are less engaged and communicate less with their parents directly. According to the findings of the observation, a father of a five-year-old boy revealed that his son, who used to enjoy verbal connection after being exposed to video games, no longer spends time with them. He now exhibited passive media intake, preferring the screen to expressing his feelings and ideas. As can be seen, the majority of kids stop interacting socially with their family and friends.

It is evident from an analysis employing the attachment theory that excessive screen time might diminish social bonding and decrease parent-child interactions. However, increasing a child's sense of security with a caregiver can foster pleasant interactions and reduce screen time.

Attachment Theory suggests the following recommendations: restrict unsupervised screen time, promote alternative emotional regulation techniques, use the screen as an educational tool rather than a substitute for emotional comfort, and support responsive parenting. In the digital era, parents may help their children's development of greater emotional resilience, healthier social skills, language development, and long-term psychological well-being by balancing solid attachment relationships and digital exposure.

6. Summing Up

Using observational learning and attachment theories, the study investigates how short-form movies affect children's behaviour, social relationships, attention level, and emotional regulation. The study's findings reveal that excessive exposure to fast-paced digital media material harms children's entire development, whether cognitive or emotional, lowers recall, promotes impatience, and, most crucially, damages the parent-child relationship. Applying both theories clarifies the research.

The findings underline the need for balance in children's digital consumption, advising parents and caregivers to apply organised media usage, co-viewing techniques, and alternate attention-building activities. Limiting short-form video exposure, engaging children in prolonged non-digital activities, fostering interactive play, and prioritising verbal and physical comfort over digital soothing can all assist to counteract the harmful impacts of excessive screen time.

Finally, while short-form videos are an unavoidable aspect of modern media consumption, their impact on early infant development must be carefully monitored. Parents, educators, and caregivers play an important role in instilling acceptable media habits, encouraging real-world social contacts, and supporting long-term attention methods. Children may benefit from technology while developing strong cognitive, emotional, and social abilities that are necessary for lifetime learning and well-being, provided deliberate digital parenting methods are used.

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EXPERIMENTING THE GENRE OF MOCKUMENTARY IN MALAYALAM CINEMA: THROUGH THE LENS OF SCI-FI FILM *GAGANACHARI*

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Abstract

Mockumentary is a genre of filmmaking where a fictional story is presented as a documentary. Using fake interviews and settings, this type of film navigates the audience through the storyline. The Malayalam language film *Gaganachari,* directed by Arun Chandu, is one such film. It parodies the topic of dystopian futures and alien invasions in a satirical manner through the mockumentary style. The film uses humour and irony to comment on societal norms, politics, and cultural conventions. The aim of this research paper is to understand the impact of the film when two genres like mockumentary and sci-fi are mixed together. The film adapts science fiction as a vehicle for satire, and it encourages the viewers to think critically about the world around them. The movie is set against the backdrop of a dystopian Kerala in the 2040s, mainly revolving around the lives of 3 bachelors and a mysterious alien that takes refuge in their apartment. The film employs multiple narrative threads in which the story is narrated by the three bachelors alternately. Absurdity and surrealism are included throughout the movie, especially in the way the futuristic planet and the alien woman's relationships with the human characters are portrayed. This research paper examines how the features of mockumentary films are encompassed in the film *Gaganachari,* giving the audience 1 hour and 55 minutes of comedic relief.

Keywords: Mockumentary, Dystopian future, Sci-fi, Malayalam cinema, Absurdity.

Mockumentary is a type of film or television show that illustrates fictional events, presented in the style of a documentary with a humorous and satirical tone. The story line, characters, and events depicted in mockumentaries are often fictional, and it uses real-life interview formats to present the plot. In order to create a more realistic and documentary-like effect, actors may improvise their mode of acting. Mockumentary is derived from the words *mock* and *documentary.* The term was originally coined in the 1960s, and it gained acceptance in the mid-1990s as Rob Reiner, the director of the American mockumentary comedy film *This Is Spinal Tap*, used it to convey information about the movie in interviews. It is from the beginning of the 1980s; the genre started to gain attention.

Mockumentary is a sub-genre of documentary which was formed to lure more audiences to this type of filmmaking. While documentaries seek to educate, inform, or record events or realities, mockumentaries seek to amuse, satirise, or parody events. Documentaries place an emphasis on truth and accuracy, while mockumentaries distort events for comedic purposes. Mockumentaries are frequently regarded as a parody of documentaries which depict real life as it is. The serious tone of documentaries is replaced by humour, irony and sarcasm. Documentaries often follow linear narrative structures, while mockumentaries prefer non-linear ones. Mockumentaries blur the boundaries between fact and fiction by enabling a distinctive reflection on our perceptions of reality and truth.

Filmmaking techniques of mockumentary films are simply the imitation of those of documentaries. They use interviews as a primary tool of storytelling. They also make use of shaky and handheld cameras to make the situation seem more real and spontaneous even though it is scripted. To bring more genuineness to it, they use found footage, such as news clips or any kind of video from the real time. Another major feature is that the characters often break the fourth wall by acknowledging the camera and speaking directly to it. Use of subtle humour in order to criticise political figures, popular culture, etc., is yet another feature of the genre.

The 1984 American mockumentary comedy film *This Is Spinal Tap,* directed by Rob Reiner, is a fictional documentary that follows the unlucky British heavy metal band Spinal Tap on their catastrophic US tour. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, tells the story of three film students who go into the Black Hills Forest to record a ghostly witch, only to discover that they are being chased by a mysterious entity. *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan,* a 2006 movie directed by Larry Charles, revolves around the adventures of Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev as he travels across America, documenting his everyday interactions with people. These movies could be regarded as some of the well-known mockumentaries in world cinema. Mockumentary has also gained popularity through TV shows. American TV shows like *The Office* (2001-2013) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020) are two popular outcomes of the genre.

Though mockumentary films were formed and were evolving over five decades, it's still an area of filmmaking that's yet to be explored more in India. Examples for the genre in Indian cinema are very few and new. The Bollywood movie *Badman* (2016), directed by Soumik Sen, can be considered one of the first Indian mockumentaries. It criticises the filmmaking in Bollywood and makes fun of the social media culture.

This study will analyse the Malayalam movie *Gaganachari* (2024), directed by Arun Chandu, which stands out as an eminent example, making it the first and only mockumentary film of the language to date. Not only does the movie blend sci-fi with mockumentary, but it also brings nostalgia using 80s and 90s Malayalam film clips and dialogues. The movie is set in dystopian Kerala of the 2040s, facing the threat of alien invasion. The main characters of the movie are three bachelors (Victor, Allan (his relative), and Vaibhav (his cook)) who eventually end up giving refuge to an alien. The objective of this study is to analyse the experimentation of the mockumentary genre in Malayalam cinema through *Gaganachari,* focusing on its narrative techniques, visual style and the reception of the movie among the audience, critics and film enthusiasts.

Cinema has evolved a lot in every way since the Lumière Brothers first screened a 45-46 second video of the *Workers leaving the Factory* in 1895. The filmmakers, around the world, who have come and gone over the years have tried different genres and filmmaking techniques to make the audience engage with the visual media. As technology has evolved a lot and audiences have access to unlimited media at their fingertips, people have gotten bored of the conventional and traditional way of storytelling, and so the conception of cinema has declined. So, the filmmakers have to constantly challenge themselves in order to bring people to the cinemas. Use of new narrative techniques could be a way to do that. The audience has to be met with a situation where they can experience a cinematic world which is above their expectations. Cinema has experimented with different narrative styles and genres over the years. One such genre is mockumentary. Though it has been popular internationally, it's novel to the Indian audience. *Gaganachari* (2024) thus has introduced the genre to a huge audience.

Gaganachari (2024) blends fiction with documentary techniques. The movie starts by showing an AI-generated aerial shot of Earth from the Bharat Space Station. And from there it brings the audience to a post-apocalyptic Kerala in the 2040s which is now under the threat of an alien invasion. A team of interviewers are shown going to the bunker of an ex-military officer, Mr Victor, to shoot a documentary, as Victor had arguably encountered and fought the alien when they first landed in Kasol. Thus, the film blends fiction with documentary-style storytelling. Footages that seem like old news reportings are shown in between the interviews (00:07:55). Again, enhancing the feature of mockumentary in the film. These found footages also help in getting a clearer idea of what went wrong in the past. The ratio of the movie changes to 4:3 except for the interview part, clearly mocking the documentary style. While interviewing Victor, old news reports supporting his arguments of being a petrolhead rider and the government cancelling the petrol-powered vehicles, eventually bringing in electric vehicles with in-built GPS systems to watch each and every driver, are shown. AI-generated visuals are used to create the images of aliens and their spaceships. Shaky, hand-held cameras are used throughout the movie except for the interview part, to mimic the real documentary filmmaking style, making the scenes appear spontaneous, not scripted (00:06:00). Another major feature of documentaries that has been parodied here is the breaking of the fourth wall. The characters of the movie notice the camera and speak directly to it. The audience would feel like they are observers of the whole event rather than spectators of a fictional story. All the sequences from the movie where Victor, Allen and Vaibhav are being interviewed are examples of that. The narrative technique used in the film is as refreshing as a unique storytelling experience. Even though a lot of sci-fi movies have been released on the same subject, *Gaganachari* stands out, as it provides a familiar atmosphere. The line between fiction and reality is blurred in the movie, as the story is told in a documentary style, often with a comedic tone.

"Mockumentaries thrive on irony and absurdity, presenting situations that are so ridiculous they become comical. This technique can highlight the absurdity of certain beliefs, behaviors, or institutions, inviting viewers to question their own assumptions." (Ashley) There are many moments in the movie which will make the audience question their own beliefs. Making everything seem surreal and absurd yet so real. One such moment is when the banning of petroleum powered vehicles is mentioned. According to Victor, "Surpassing the price of coconut oil and gold, the biggest fuel price hike in history happened in 2025! I think it was in 2027; usage of petrol and possession of petrol vehicles were banned instead companies started to make GPS equipped battery vehicles" (00:07:43- 00:08:10). The scenes where Victor informs the interviewers of how November 1st had been Kerala Piravi Day in the past, and the way he introduces Kadhakali and even Nettipattam (an ornament elephants wore on festivals) is another example as all of these things still exists in real time and it's hard to imagine them being introduced as artifacts. Another example of it is how the alien looks nothing like anyone expected it to look.

The mannerisms for the alien somewhat resemble that of a cat even though she looks like a human. She eats Victor's cat, eats cat food and nothing else, sits and behaves like a cat, having never even blinked her eyes.

Allen's love for the alien and his random dreams about a future together with her is a major element that brings humour in the movie. Allen is depicted as a character who longs for love. Though the 250-year-old alien cannot process the thought of having a life with a 25-year-old human being, she leaves Earth with lots of human features that she might've adapted from Allen. At instances, the eye of the alien appears to be green in colour which shows her alien traits.

Throughout the movie, there are only specific instances at which the alien blinks her eyes, which shows the features of an alien. But after a point, she blinks her eyes often just like how humans do.

Allan's way of trying to bring human traits in the alien by making her watch pop-cultural movies of the 80s and 90s also brings the comedy to light. As mentioned before, there is a cat reference in the movie particularly focusing on the alien. A lot of her mannerisms mirror that of a cat or more specifically a feral cat whose trust must be earned and it is only after some trust is established that the boys realise that she can talk if her speech machine is fixed but funnily once her speech machine is fixed, what comes out sounds nothing like what one might imagine someone who looks the alien might sound like. Instead of the sweet and melodious voice of a young girl, she has the voice of an old Mollywood actress. The contrast between expected voice and what eventually becomes her established voice is rather amusing. In the climax, the alien is actually returning to the Cat world. It can also invoke humour as humans have visualised the aliens in a hundred ways but a cat is none of them.

Post apocalyptic settings usually evoke a sense of dread but the humorous tone creates an atmosphere that is light even as it is set in the backdrop of Kerala that is ravaged by floods and constantly under the threat of alien invasion. This contrast is further exacerbated when we see the different shots inside and outside of the relatively safe bunker where the characters live. The destruction caused due to the excessive rain and flooding along with the alien megastructures that are looming in the sky like an ever-present threat sets up an atmosphere that is typical for post-apocalyptic film. But the fact that most of the time is spent indoors creates a degree of separation which is further exacerbated by the light tone provided by the light and familiar humour present throughout the movie. Personal protective equipment was introduced as something important that people must wear when venturing out, the point made clearer by the fact that authorities check if they are being properly worn. But the seriousness of that is quickly thrown out because most of the time, the characters do not bother with PPE but rather choosing cloaks. "Mockumentaries thrive on irony and absurdity, presenting situations that are so ridiculous they become comical. This technique can highlight the absurdity of certain beliefs, behaviors, or institutions, inviting viewers to question their own assumptions" (Ashley). There are many moments in the movie which will make the audience question their own beliefs. Making everything seem surreal and absurd yet so real. One such moment is when the banning of petroleum-powered vehicles is mentioned. According to Victor, "Surpassing the price of coconut oil and gold, the biggest fuel price hike in history happened in 2025! I think it was in 2027; usage of petrol and possession of petrol vehicles were banned; instead, companies started to make GPS-equipped battery vehicles" (00:07:43 - 00:08:10). The scenes where Victor informs the interviewers of how November 1st had been Kerala Piravi Day in the past and the way he introduces Kadhakali and even Nettipattam (an ornament elephants wore on festivals) are another example, as all of these things still exist in real time, and it's hard to imagine them being introduced as artefacts. Another example of it is how the alien looks nothing like anyone expected it to look. The mannerisms for the alien somewhat resemble that of a cat even though she looks like a human. She eats Victor's cat, eats cat food and nothing else, sits and behaves like a cat, having never even blinked her eyes.

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A major feature of mockumentary is using subtle humour for social commentary. One such moment from the movie is the mention of the existing social arguments over the conception of beef. "I have heard that many have died during the riots in the name of beef. That's how the beef ban came to effect" (00:28:04-00:28:07), says Vaibhav. The characters talk about how "geef", a hybrid of goat and dog, was brought out by the government as an end result of the problems that happened over beef. Another example could be seen towards the end of the movie, when they realise the aliens are not beastlike creatures like how they were told to be. Instead, it was some humans that disguised themselves as the beasts and tried to create conflict between the two species. Subtly commenting that humans create their own problems and conflicts.

A more directly worded warning about human nature comes when the alien talks to Raghavan, the advanced AI, about her travels across the galaxy. She talks about civilisations light years away in another corner of the universe, where humans and this alien race lived as neighbours. Though they never agreed on thoughts, the aliens considered them to be siblings, but the humans exploited their planet with not even a thought that they could destroy it to a point of no return where the only option was to flee and search for another planet to call their home. While the humans left, history repeated itself, and the aliens made the same mistakes and had to abandon their mother planet to find another place to live. When the aliens came to Earth in search of a place to live, they came peacefully, but their approach was met with hostility and weapons. The alien brings up another thought-provoking idea because her story dismisses evolution and suggests the ancient astronaut theory. But when confronted with the fact that their entire idea of reality may be entirely or partially false, the boys choose to ridicule that idea and stay strong in the reality that had already been established for their entire lives. "You only think within the framework you made by yourself." (01:11:00-01:12:02) said by the alien rings true when the boys did not even think to question their beliefs but rather stayed glued to their established reality.

The movie worked well among the viewers in all its senses. The comic elements, though subtle, created a sense of humour among the audience, especially to the native audience. The pop-cultural references of the Malayalam movies from the 80s and 90s and dialogues inspired mainly from that bring in the comical aspect that may be unfamiliar to the non-native watchers. And the actors were so convincing in the role that they made the clearly absurd situations and dialogues sound convincing. Ganesh Kumar as Victor, Gokul Suresh as Allen, Aju Varghese as Vaibhav and Anarkali Marakkar as the alien have delivered exceptional performances in their respective roles.

Gaganachari has introduced a wide audience to the fairly unknown mockumentary, blending with the popular genre sci-fi. Though the movie did not receive the popularity it deserved, it has been well appreciated by the mass that has seen it. Though the movie was experimental, it surpassed the test with excellent direction, writing, and VFX. There is no other genre that would easily accompany a newer genre to the audience than that of sci-fi. The topic of science fiction, that of alien invasion and interplanetary travel, has always interested the audience. The Times Now has called Gaganachari "a hilarious experimental film done extremely well". A similar response was reported by The New Indian Express, calling it a "unique sci-fi mockumentary with ample laughs". *Gaganachari* has not only introduced a wide audience to the genre of mockumentary but has also influenced filmmakers to try new and innovative filmmaking techniques, also giving courage to budding filmmakers to come out of their insecurity and bring their visions to the screen.

As part of the analysis, some film enthusiasts were asked their opinion of the film *Gaganchari.* Out of the many positive reviews, the reply of a twenty-one-year-old college student, Lopa Mudra, has given the accurate answer to how the making of such experimental movies and their wide acceptance among the audience inspire new filmmakers. She said, "Being one of the first and very rare mockumentary of malayalam cinema, *Gaganachari*hitting the big screen helped me in making my first short film project "Not A Biopic" which is a mockumentary possible. I was somewhat confused about releasing it to the public when I wrote the script but watching Gaganachari and its reception made me think otherwise and I had the courage to go on and make the project come true." Thus, the movie not only reshapes the world of cinema but also opens a door for innovative films and filmmakers.

In conclusion, this study has analysed *Gaganachari* (2024) as a mockumentary film, examining its narrative techniques, satire, social commentaries and parodies. These findings show how the film employs the mockumentary style to destabilise the conventional filmmaking techniques. The research emphasises how Gaganachari as a mockumentary enhanced the evolution of this specific genre. The film paved the way for many new filmmakers to explore mockumentary as a genre. Building on this study, future research might be able to examine how mockumentary movies like *Gaganachari*affect the perception of reality, the media, and society.

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ANOMIE, ANDROPHILIA AND AUTHORITY: A TRIPARTITE DECONSTRUCTION OF MAFIA SUB CULTURE'S GLORIFICATION

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Abstract

A subculture suggests resistance to oppressive societal ideologies. It can flourish sometimes through the rejection of functioning middle-class ideals by criminality. A prominent subculture of criminal deviancy against repressive state apparatus can be considered to be the Mafia associations. However, in contemporary society, mafias have been glamourised in fictional narratives due to the assurance of cultural capital associated with the area of their work. This paper aims to question such idealised myths, analyse the mafia's position in society from the lens of Durkheim's and Merton's Anomie and Strain theory of deviance and incorporate feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives to understand their glorification. The construct of mafias being more than the government, almost equal to the family, promises the underprivileged not only absolute power but also protection and identity. By understanding the unique hierarchy, loyalty, shared oaths and ideologies practised in 'Ndrangheta, we will explore this subculture's role in shaping Sicilian society, the literary Romanticisation of abuse and machismo as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, and the reader's fantasy of acquiring power within a patriarchal setup through association with a 'dark lover', as exemplified by the "mob-wife" aesthetic. The paper also deconstructs the relevant tropes by discussing the prevalence of intimate partner violence in mafia households and their dependence on money laundering, gambling, and prostitution to hoard wealth. While the corrupted reality and the vigilante narrative remain discordant, this subculture's popularity also reasserts humanity's persistent desire for a parallel ruling body that would protect the disenfranchised from capitalistic and legal injustice.
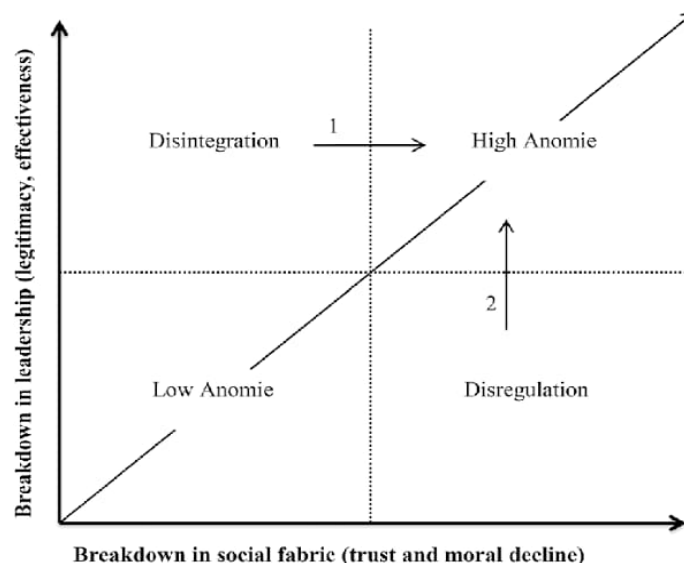
Fig 1: Graph on "Anomie"

Keywords: Subculture, 'Ndrangheta, Economy, Archetype, Psychosexual, Feminist Criminology

Introduction

The Europol threat assessment describes the 'Ndrangheta as "among the most threatening OCGs [organised crime groups] at a global level." This paper examines the rise and contemporary influence of this syndicate that achieved significant power in the 1980s through its dominance of the cocaine market. Notably, this group is implicated in over 200 kidnappings between the early 1970s and mid-1990s, including the high-profile abduction of a member of the J. Paul Getty family.

GETTY STILL WON'T PAY

OIL billionaire Paul Getty will not pay ransom for his kidnapped grandson Paul.

The 80-year-old grandfather made this firm decision today—after seeing pictures of Paul junior with his right ear cut off.

A spokesman said at Mr. Getty's home in Sutton Place, Guildford, Surrey: "Mr. Getty has seen the pictures, but it makes no difference.

"He stands by what he originally said. If he helps one grandchild, then his 13 others would become vulnerable to kidnap attempts."

● ITALIAN police today faced their third kidnapping case when a group of masked men in Milan seized a 38-year-old industrialist, Sgnor Aldo Cannavale, and drove off with him in a van. Only a week ago Count Luigi Rossi de Montelera, son of the former head of the Martini vermouth firm, was also abducted.

Fig 2: Newspaper Article

Contemporary discourse frequently designates this entity as one of the most powerful syndicate organisations globally. Evidence suggests their control of approximately 80% of the European drug trade, with operational expansion across multiple continents. Their estimated annual revenue, derived from a diverse portfolio of illicit activities including extortion, gambling, and embezzlement, is reported to exceed £52 billion, surpassing the reported revenues of major multinational corporations such as Deutsche Bank and McDonald's. This study will critically analyse the syndicate's ascendancy, categorise its operational structure and social dynamics within a subcultural framework, and explore its mythic representation in contemporary media.

Research Question

This paper aims to probe the syndicate practices and how 'Ndrangheta's cultural ties to Calabria remain at the core of their categorisation as a subculture. It inspects contemporary portrayals, analyses how archetypes persist and imparts nuance into such mythicised depictions. This paper also deconstructs our idea of the mafia as either a valorous group of criminals or charming saviours and questions society's constant desire for an alternate body that doesn't supplant the government but works parallel to it.

● **WHY THE MAFIAS ORIGINATED:**

1950s Italy saw a boom in economy. The 1960s were categorised by an equally stable state of government, but inflation emerged in the 1970s, particularly during the crises of 1974 and 1976. Social security agencies and central and local administrations suffer substantial deficits due to growing disparity between profits and wages, coupled with mass youth unemployment and social unrest. This period is referred to as Anni di Piombo or the Years of Lead (1968-82). Consequently, in an era of governmental weakness, the common man felt cut off from legal methods of earning a livelihood. The political turbulence hence acted as the base from which sprang the mafias, who used illicit ways to attain cultural goals and social capital. This situation aligns with Durkheim and Merton's concept of anomie. It can be defined as disequilibrium in the relations between means and ends due to inadequate normative regulation. The mafias arose as an innovative response to coping with 1970's normlessness. Thus, their criminality is an organic part of society, as Durkheim identifies deviancy to be at the core of a functioning culture – and suggests resistance to an authoritarian state that fails its people.

Selected Economic Indicators						
	1970-72	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
Consumer Prices 1/	5.25	10.8	19.1	17.0	16.8	16.4
Real GDP 1/	2.35	6.9	4.2	-3.5	5.7	1.7
Gross Fixed Investment/GDP 2/	14.2	14.3	14.3	12.8	12.6	12.5
Current Account 3/	1.7	-2.5	-7.8	-0.5	-2.9	2.4

1/ Average annual rates of change.
2/ Excluding residential construction, in 1970 lire -- per cent.
3/ Billions of dollars.

* Economist, Division of International Finance, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Federal Reserve System. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Joint Country Groups Panel at the American Political Science Association meeting September 1977. I would like to thank George Henry and David Howard for their helpful comments on that paper.

Table 1

Current-Account Deficit of the Public Administration (Billions of Lire)								
	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	197
Central Administration	334	-776	-1306	-2770	-1612	-3010	-1925	-261
Local Governments	-272	-415	- 445	- 370	- 483	-2406	-2399	-41
Social Security Institutions	578	332	- 613	697	- 221	-2905	-2905	-162
Total	640	-869	-2364	-2443	-2316	-8429	-7229	-83
As Percentage of GDP	1.1	-1.4	-3.4	-3.0	-2.3	-7.3	-5.0	-4.8

Source: Relazione Generale Sulla Situazione Economica del Paese, various issues.

1/ Cotula and Lo Faso provide a detailed analysis of the deficit through 1975.

Table2: "*The Italian Economic Crises Of The 1970s*" by Raymond Lubitz, (pp 1-3)

• **MAFIA AS A SUBCULTURE:**

The mafia, particularly 'Ndrangheta, embodies the complex characteristics of subculture. Milton M. Gordon's sociological definition of subculture captures the broader aspect where he says (1947), a subculture is a subdivision of a national culture. It can be defined as 'a world within a world' with its own norms and values regarding aesthetic, political, cultural and sexual matters. Conversely, in criminology, subcultural theory, stemming from the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism, focuses on whose values and norms promote criminal behaviour, particularly juvenile delinquency. It emphasises the discord between these deviant subcultures and mainstream society.

What particularly qualifies 'Ndrangheta as a subculture is its ties to Calabria that impart historical meaning to its rituals and a sense of home and belonging to the land, along with its hyperfocus on blood ties that advocates the idea that this organisation is more than a syndicate and can act as a second home. It focuses on humbleness that is associated with Calabrian culture rather than machismo to set itself apart as a subculture whose other features are:

Unique Identity – The term 'Ndrangheta comes from the Greek word ἀνδραγαθία (andragathía), meaning "gallantry" or "manly" virtue. In many areas of Calabria, the verb 'ndranghitiari means "to engage in a defiant and valiant attitude" (Gratteri and Nicasso 21). However, the word in itself is a feminine noun which ties the group to the Italian cult of Madonna [Sergi 21]. Their identity is defined by a shared sense of revenge, honour and respect, and they follow a code of conduct which includes politica, sigere, matteta, etc.

Jargon – Ndrina means family clan. It is the basic unit of the mafia group that rules over a specific area and comprises a family and a surname. Locale means the geographical area that is ruled by a set of *Ndrines*. The capobastone is the figure who is usually in charge of an *Ndrina* and answers to *capo crimine*, the head of the *Crimine*. The *Crimine,* in turn, is an annual meeting within the Ndrangheta to discuss business dealings. Next to the *capobastone* is the *mastro di giornate,* who coordinates communication between families. Other examples could be *'mandomento'* and *'provincia.* (Sergi 10). The recruitment into organisational crime is posed at different levels.
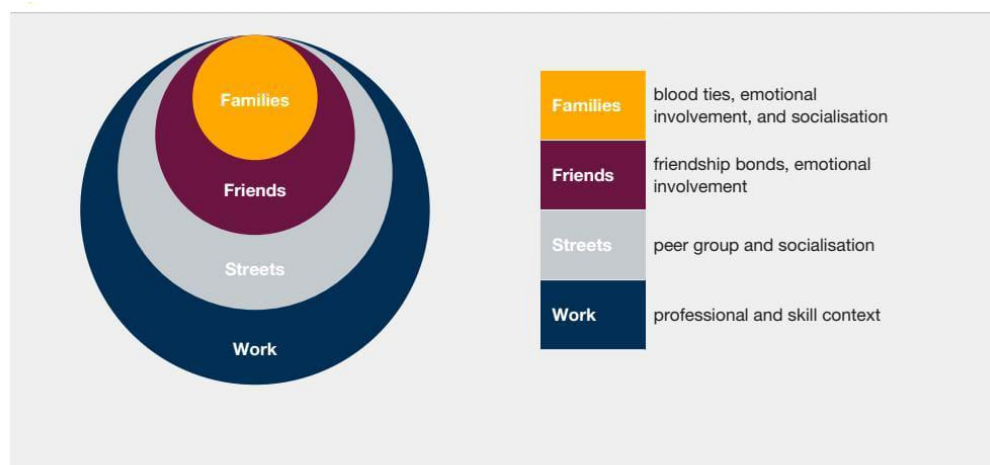
Source: OSCE (2023). Authors' analysis of questionnaire and interview answers.

Fig 3: Contextual field for recruitment into Organized Crime. (p 28)

Such recruitment brings along the institution's rituals (like the oath of loyalty and code of silence). According to Buscetta, Subsequently, "the more the organization is centralized and clandestine, the greater the threat it poses." (Falcone 100).

> *"In the presence of three members of the family the neophyte takes into his hands the*
>
> *picture of a saint which he dampens with the blood that drips from one of his fingers*
>
> *punctured by a pin, and sets fire to it. While the picture burns in his hands, he ends the*
>
> *oath with this sentence: 'My flesh must burn like this holy picture if I'm not faithful to the*
>
> *oath" (Stajan, 1986: 42-3).*

Style/expression – The members of 'Ndrangheta opt for stylistic decisions based on biblical lores to differentiate themselves. Members from lower dote portray incision marks like a prick of the finger or arm with a needle or knife. They take oaths on Osso, Mastrosso and Carcagnosso, and their patron saint could be Saint Elizabeth. Higher-ranking members, however, depict body incisions like engravings on either the left or right shoulders and signs of a cross on the chest. They take oaths in the name of Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and their patron saints are Saints Peter and Paul.

Espirit de corps (pride and loyalty) – at the crux of ideology remains the cursus honorum – career of honour. It is a mix of the tradition of masculine honour the mafias take pride in and their need to be recognised by their peers (Sergi 11). Loyalty amongst children is instilled through mothers who teach them about the great services of the mafia and also through appropriation of religion – particularly Catholicism – to focus on respect, honour and revenge. The symbolism of the Virgin Mary and the rituals of baptism are prevalent (Sergi 20). In fact, the crime is held at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Polsi, which ties them to Calabrian culture.

Status criteria – The word rank is forbidden. So, mafias use the term 'dote' to refer to their place in family hierarchy. Examples of lower-ranking officials (societàminore) are Picciotto, Camorra and Sgarro, while examples of higher-ranking members (societàmaggiore) are Santa, Vangelo, Quartino, Trequartino and Padrino (Godfather). The lower-ranking members would only know people from similar ranks and will learn the names of others when they rise up the ranks. The lower rankers deal with trafficking, extortion, prostitution, etc., while the higher-ups usually mitigate deals with politicians and government officials (Sergi 11). In a letter from 1973, Domenico Papalia writes,

> *"I'm happy for the dote they gave you…. you see that there are*
>
> *few who have it…. I have it, Ciccio Sperito, Rocco, my uncle 'unigru, Peppe Grillo*
>
> *and a few others. So, if they haven't been notified in Plati. Ill take care of*
>
> *notifying them."*

Power structure within family: The family is the cellular matrix of the mafia organisation. Until the mid-1980s, it was believed that the mafia was not an organisation, but rather a 'collective attitude' (Hobsbawm 52).

But later, another concept emerges: that the mafia is a hypercentralised organisation, like an octopus with a head and a host of tentacles. The "Head" makes all the decisions and a base that faithfully carries these decisions out.
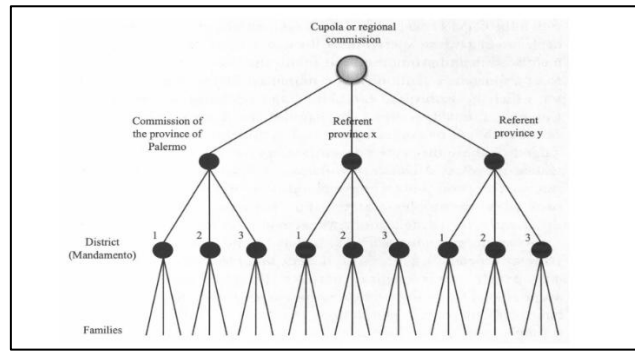
Fig 4: Organizational Structure "How Do Mafias Organize" by Maurizio Catino (p191)
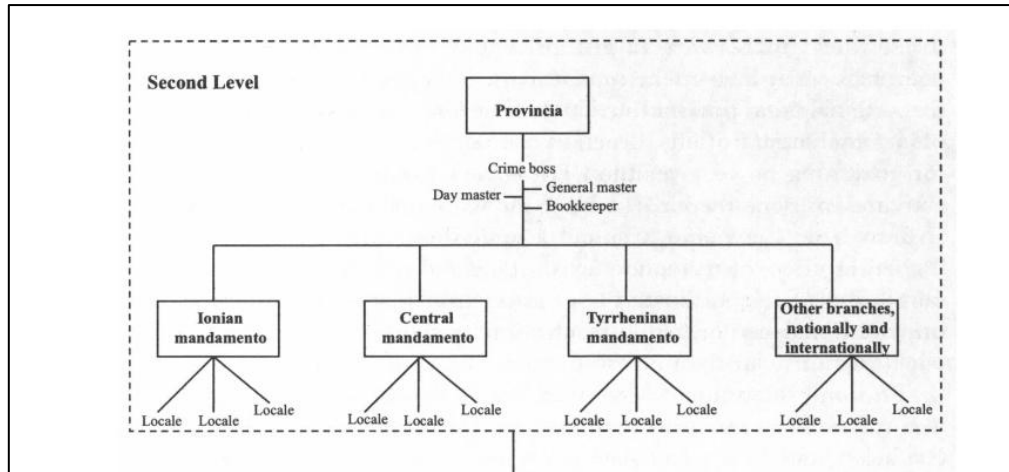
Fig 5 : Ndrangheta's Family Structure
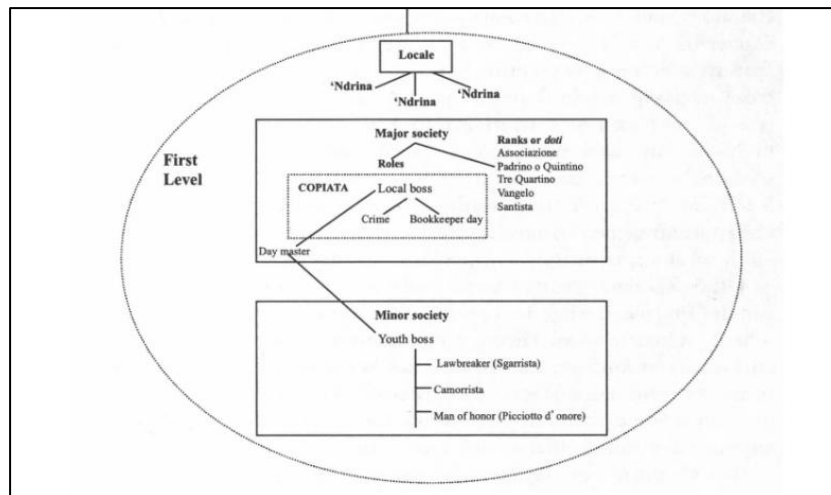
· **CONTEMPORARY MAFIA GLORIFICATION:**

CG Jung states that all powerful ideas in history persist as archetypes, and so does the myth of mafias. The narrative is remodelled to suit contemporary tastes. We notice an instance in modern fiction, such as "The Brutal Prince", "My Sweetest Oblivion", etc. In these stories, we can see the utmost romanticisation of questionable activities.

For instance,

"I'll always find you, Aida", "You're mine, Aida."

---S. Lark's "The Brutal prince" (p127)

Flashing ultimate archetype:

> *I find a mechanic crouched down behind a BMW. He's older and lacks any of the usual*
>
> *markers of the Polish mafia—tattoos, gold chains, and gaudy rings—so I assume he just*
>
> *works on the cars and isn't one of the Butcher's soldiers.* ("The Brutal Prince")

(p 175)

Mafiosi are portrayed through tropes reminiscent of their previous valour. The protagonist, if a male mafiosi, is usually a business-minded man with a great propensity for violence. He has adequate connections, is fiercely loyal to family and group, and would resort to murder and kidnapping to solve conflicts.

> *"She was mine. And I'd kill anyone who told me otherwise."* ("My Sweetest Oblivion")

(p 250)

However, he is ethically bad but not unquestionably evil – like the picaro in picaresque novels – and doesn't commit crimes which can put them on the wrong side of the audience. The protagonist, if female, is always inexperienced in sexual matters and unique in a way that she possesses certain traits that are only appreciated by the mafioso himself.

> *"Screw the parties. Let's go home. I'll fuck you nice and slow all night long."*
>
> ("My Sweetest Oblivion")

(p 347)

She could be an archetypal damsel-in-distress, considering older literature, or she could be radical and rebellious, catering to a modern audience. The characters complement each other.

The tropes – regardless of era – depict cliches like kidnapping, a controlling, dark lover, abuse, a forced marriage or proximity, and enemies to lovers. Violence becomes a sort of ornamentalisation to prove the legitimacy of the case and take his dedication further and is not approached with serious consideration of domestic abuse. The glorification of such quasi-abusive men is, however, ubiquitous. He falls under the characterisation of the dark lover.

> *"Whiskey and flame. Sleepless nights. Tattooed skin, white t-shirts, and rough*
>
> *hands. Love and lust and happiness. He was everything."* ("My sweetest Oblivion")

(p 360)

But understanding what exactly propels this obsession through the Electra complex is the second criterion of this paper. What Freud called the feminine Oedipal behaviour, Jung explained as the Electra Complex.

1) Reasons Behind Fascination:

The Electra complex is a girl's rivalry with her mother for her father's attention (Chodorow 137-158). It occurs at the phallic stage of development when the girl realises her lack of phallus and identifies with her mother after imaginary castration. She recognises phallus as a "fleshly incarnation of transcendence" (Beauvoir 82) and desires to have it through father. However, after condemnation of incest by Superego, she either submits to paternal authority – resembling maternal powerlessness – or rebels against phallocentrism by coveting the phallus herself. Due to her "lack" (Lacan 139), she shifts focus onto symbolic father figures whom she challenges either to dominate them and maintain her superiority or be dominated in the process. The stronger the man, the greater the pleasure. Hence, desire for phallus – the ultimate signifier – propels women towards the dark, authoritarian paternalistic trope. She even wants to win over abuse, and these fictions glamourise it to exaggerate the process.

> "We both know you belong to me. You will always belong to me."
>
> — Mila Finelli, Mafia Darling

(p 117)

Another trope often associated with mafias is kidnapping or forced conjugality. Dreams suggest fulfilment of wishes (Freud 217), and so does this trope. The heroine, at the start, is incarcerated within an abusive family, and it is the mafia who frees her. Alternatively, the impoverished protagonist finds herself at odds with the society and eventually depends on the mafioso to pay off her debts. What these instances highlight is the repressed wish to be treasured. It's understandable that in a capitalistic society, the underprivileged heroine has to hope for an almost-miracle man to save her. Considering mafias to be deviants resisting state oppression, the heroine also idolises someone she resonates with.

The trope, however, differs from Cinderella's story at its very core: mafias are about rebellion, and so are these stories. The criminal is equally loving and dangerous. The mafioso brings with him a promise of thrill, passion and power. The heroine tastes this concoction by associating with him. So, the mafioso isn't the archetypal prince charming but is a rogue. She rebels and exercises her freewill by choosing a fiery lover. He becomes the medium through which the girl asserts herself.

Another cliche is enemies to lovers and forced proximity. To understand this, we must understand that the female protagonists are young teens who are inexperienced. At this stage, she understands that marriage and coitus incarcerate her immanence. Yet, she is attracted to men who both dazzle and frighten her (Beauvoir 415). Hence, in this turmoil, she doesn't approach her object of fantasy directly but instead hopes for scenarios where they are put together accidentally. In both enemies to lovers and forced proximity, two opposite characters have to adjust to each other, which acts as the backdrop for love. Hence, closeness and love are desired, but not loss of autonomy or the repetitions inherent in relationships which these tropes evince.

2) Reader, Heroine and The Mafia

The reader inserts herself into the heroine, and their thought processes aren't much different from the heroine's. However, one must also understand the patriarchal setup inherent in this. Firstly, androphilic readers romanticise abusive acts such as stalking, kidnapping, road-raging, fighting, etc. While most do understand that reality and fiction are worlds apart, idealisation of abuse desensitises us to actual tales of trauma. By passing off instances of toxicity as passion, it influences a cultural fabric where traditionalism and hegemonic masculinity are more accepted. Impressionable teens could use the machismo of the mafia to define their gender worldview. Certain instances also can be categorised as soft-core pornography, which can lead to dopamine secretion, addiction and dysfunction if consumed regularly.

Secondly, the glorification of authority becomes an act of internalising misogyny. This is particularly evident in the mob-wife trend where women define themselves through their husband's job. They aim for financial and emotional security not through personal efforts but through their male partners. Power, hence, remains in male hands, and the fetishisation of this dynamic is even more harmful. It promotes us to see ourselves through the male gaze and uphold patriarchy, which thrives on male dominance and female subservience by submitting to the patriarch in exchange for social or economic benefits. It repackages marriage to violent figures as something idealistic when historically it hasn't been so.

• DECONSTRUCTION OF MAFIA GLORIFICATION:

We have looked into the mafia as a subculture and why it is fetishised, which also calls for the deconstruction of the same idea. The myth of mafias that portrays them as valorous in movies like The Godfather isn't necessarily true. They terrorise the working class and small businesses for protection fees. Various instances of brutality come to the surface, but amongst them, the famous case of kidnapping shows us the horror:

"This is Paul's ear. If we don't get some money within 10 days, then the other ear will arrive in other words, he will arrive in little bits."

They work together with the corporate to create scams and participate in loansharking that threaten the middle class. They are also in bed with corrupt government officials and get caught only when the mafia group abandons them in case of any betrayal to the omertà or as scapegoats to mask the bigger crimes of top members. The oaths of respect, honour and shared identity hence only imbue them with false belonging.

The idea of the universally wealthy mafia member isn't true either. The profession is in itself usually short-lived and littered with threats from the police, anti-mafia organisations and internet killings.

The money earned can also prove insufficient if one lives beyond their means for the grand lifestyle. It is objectively hard to escape the mafia world, either after profiting off it due to threats of the omerta. Sometimes, they can be trialled and put under life imprisonments, thus essentially abandoning their family.

"And my goal was to reach the highest peaks of the 'ndrangheta. And once you reach the top, it's over: you can't trust

anyone anymore, you have to look behind you, move from one place to another, escape from enemies. And in the end you

find yourself alone, without family and without friends."

(Confession of the repentant Antonio Belnome, former local head of Giussano (Province of Monza and Brianza)

Human trafficking, slave labour and prostitution are at the crux of the system. Men are sold into slave labour while women are sold as prostitutes. It becomes almost impossible to escape their imprisonment, as neither the law nor the corporate care for their mistreatment. The myth of the mafia protecting the disenfranchised hence becomes a lie. Indeed, the areas under mafia administration depict the least developments in economy as the organisations thrive off stealing people. Their capitalisation on the illegal drug trade is also equally unethical.

Additionally, mafia organisations reveal a disturbing systematic pattern of gendered abuse. Women associated with these criminal frameworks are often subjected to a spectrum of violence [Paoli 74] – physical, sexual and psychological – to impose control over them. A study by the UK National Crime Agency in January 2019 found that, -[Understanding the Role of women in organized crime 31]

"Vulnerable females are targeted by male offenders who create the impression of a

romantic relationship through affection and the provision of gifts, … before

exploiting the victim.."

From Simone de Beauvoir's concept "The Other", we can understand how women within mafia structures are relegated to subordinate status and their role is shaped by male hegemony. One instance can be drawn here,

I told the judge: "Dottore, I'm on the first floor. If they want to retaliate again,

they know where to find me … All the lives they've taken from me – they took

my brother; they took my husband. I don't think there's anything else.

Told by Lucia, a Camorra woman who married to a mob. She further revealed anyone who is not born into a mafia family will always be treated as an "outsider". Even after being oppressed and exploited by all the means, they are often found to be commoditised either through forced prostitution or trafficking. Connell's hegemonic masculinity underpins the violent dominant hypermasculine ideal, and the women (part of mafia families) undergo a process of masculinisation. Even marriage is also just a strategical tool both to explore and exploit their own power and business (March 73). Thus, their involvement clearly reflects coercion and needs for survival rather than genuine agency. Such continuous threats, intimidation, and abuse create a sense of fear, silencing victims and perpetuating a cycle of impunity. Feminist criminology, intersectionality and hegemonic masculinity collectively show the stark illustration of gendered abuse within mafia structure that this paper aims to shed light on.

Conclusion:

Hence, mafias are a subculture based upon criminality whose chivalric myths have been deconstructed. However, while the mafias are a feared phenomenon, they still persist. They could be preferred for myriad reasons, such as for lowering the 'production cost' [Gambetta, 44], finding loopholes in law or offering protection that the state fails to. Thus, legal corruption creeps into a state through the decriminalisation of otherwise questionable practices. Operating at the "Shadow of the State" (Koivu 1), they produce "systematic, and strategic influence, which is legal.." (Lessing 2).

Barzel states,

"Criminal organizations operate side by side with legitimate states."

(p 231)

In fiction, they have a similar purpose of providing capital that is unavailable to the character. Hence, they shed light upon the human disregardment of dubious pathways to attain a societal goal and how authoritarian ideologies and black-market trade always exist together. It is a failing government that creates space for syndicates to rise as parasitic bodies. They extort money and push people towards gambling and prostitution under the guise of protection. Thus, we should not let criminal organisations thrive on humanity's desperation or dysfunction and instead call for better representation of the underprivileged to save them from these outwardly lucrative yet exploitative traps.

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BODY-HORROR CINEMA AS A SITE OF HISTORICAL RETELLING

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Abstract

Cinema is synonymous with popular culture owing to the former's wider scope and range. Undoubtedly, cinema is capable of inculcating different nationalities, ethnicities and communities and providing a space for expression and appreciation. Body-horror cinema foregrounds visceral horror and manifests the emotions of fear, anxiety and disgust. Body-horror films encompass extreme violations of the human body. The disfigurement and mutilation of the body, hybridity (mutation), parasitism, death and decay form the prominent sources of visceral horror in body-horror films. Body horror, the overlapping sub-genre of horror cinema, finds a place in science-fiction films as well, apart from supernatural and gore films. Beyond the brutality of bloody imagery, body-horror cinema could become a site of historical retelling. The Norwegian director Andre's *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) foregrounds the lives of the father-and-son coroners and provides a glimpse into their inquest of "an unidentified woman's body". The infamous seventeenth-century witch trials conducted in Massachusetts, popularly known as the "Salem witch trials", form the backdrop of the film. The film is subjected to the device of close reading by placing it within the theoretical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin's "grotesque body" and Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection". The paper explores body-horror cinema as a medium of historical retelling. The paper offers a comprehensive outlook on the influence of gender in the socio-political and cultural history of a region. The paper also looks into the feminine body as the site of violence and power in light of Barbara Creed's "monstrous-feminine".

Keywords: Abjection, Body-horror, Grotesque, Monstrous-feminine, Feminine body.

Body has always been the focal point of studies carried out across the globe by learnt academicians and theorists. The body has been perceived beyond its physiological spectrum into philosophical, sociological, psychological, cultural and political arenas over the previous decades. Henceforth, there have been numerous discussions regarding the representation of the body in popular culture, especially in 'Cinema'. As philologist Xavier Aldana Reyes comments, that horror genre is synonymous with body image, as it is near to impossible to think about the genre "...without thinking about the body's messy and intimate materiality- its blood and guts, its painful vulnerabilities, its inevitable rot and decay- and the forces that threaten to exceed and transform the apparently inviolable cohesion of our physical state" (*The Cambridge Companion to American Horror* 107). Body horror/biological horror is a sub-genre that falls within the realm of horror cinema. Reyes describes body horror "as a type of fiction or cinema where corporeality constitutes the main site of fear, anxiety and sometimes even disgust for the characters and, by extension, the intended readers/viewers" (*The Palgrave Handbook ofContemporary Gothic* 393). The paper aims to study body horror cinema as a source of historical retelling in the purview of the body as a spectacle. Examining the English film *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) directed by Andre Ovredal, the discussion focuses on the aforementioned film as a medium of popular culture engaged in the historical retelling of the "Salem witch trials".

The infamous Salem Witch trials refer to the public trial and execution of people, both men and women accused to be the practitioners of witchcraft in Salem of Massachusetts Bay Colony of New England between February 1692 and May 1693. The official records account to the death of nineteen people (out of which fourteen are women and five are men) along with another man namely Giles Corey who was crushed to death using stones. The trials were evidently results of accusations made by young girls aged between 9 and 17 and "the accusations centered around the concept of "affliction", and the women accused of having caused physical and mental harm to the girls through witchcraft" (Schiff). The socio-political, religious and economic conditions prevalent in the 1690s have paramount influence in the said unfortunate trials. The long-standing battle between King Philip and the indigenous communities of Southern and Western New England resulted in political unrest, chaos and anarchy among the people. Subsequently, Southern and Western parts of New England witnessed huge influx of refugees. Within Salem, the inhabitants had mistrust and dissent amongst themselves owing to land settlements and ownerships. The laws in relation to the land rights and mortgage rules were not transparent and fair; thereby caused quarrels and disagreements among the masses of Salem. The variation in the proportion of the executed women to that of men delineates the gender-based hatred and ignorance subjected towards women. It only validates the permeance of gender as a fueling force for the fabricated trials. The later years witnessed withdrawal of charges by the accusers and in the year 1711 the Massachusetts legislature annulled all the convictions.

Irrevocably, "Salem witch trials" is considered to be one of the darkest and most cruel events of colonial North American history. The impact of the said trials is evident in its repeated appearances in the popular culture majorly through visual media like Cinema. The paper explores the concept of female body as a site of power struggle and resistance. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin's "grotesque body" and Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection," the paper adopts a close reading of the said film.

The Autopsy of Jane Doe opens with the unexpected visual imagery of the inspection of the dead body of a man conducted by the father-son duo coroners, Tommy Tilden and Austin Tilden. The film navigates through the autopsy procedure of an unidentified female body, named Jane Doe by the law enforcement official. The first stage of physical examination of Jane's body reveals signs of severe visceral shock and trauma. The revelations involve- "her wrists and ankles are fractured" (21:12), "joints are shattered" (21:24), "tongue is severed crudely" (22:27), vaginal trauma- "ridges and grooves in vaginal tissues" (25:36-25:52). The stage comprising of internal examination projects blackened lungs which according to Tommy accords to the fact that the woman must have been subjected to third degree burns (30:39). In spite of all the severely damaged internal organs Jane's body does not bear any signs of physical violence- no bruises or scarring. The corpse appears to be pristine and pure contrary to all the ugliness and pain that it holds within it. Tommy exclaims that the body should have been "disfigured beyond recognition" (31:15) owing to the extent to which the internal organs are damaged and scarred. For the effective analysis of the selected film dealing with corporeal brutality and horror, the understanding of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "Grotesque Realism" is required. Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984) introduces the concept of "grotesque realism." Grotesque realism involves debasement of everything which brings it closer to earth and this debasement is manifested through humour or laughter, that is to say it "degrades, lowers and materializes." For Bakhtin, this unconscious and comical representation of the "dreadful aspects of human life" like death and the demonic; make death connected to the renewal of life rather than opposed to life. Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World* manifests the realization that the said degradation and humour has been prevalent in the popular culture since ancient times through the Middle Ages and finally reaching its extreme point in the Renaissance only to be later degraded into romantic grotesque, thus distancing itself from the popular culture. The degeneration of grotesque after the period of Renaissance led to its association with the negative aspects of life. From nineteenth century onwards the interest in grotesque waned and then it re-emerged in a renewed form in the twentieth century in the forms of realistic grotesque and modernist grotesque. However, the paper explores the selected film in the light of Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque realism" to study the element of grotesque associated with "dead bodies" and thereby navigate through the elements of ostracization and humiliation women experience owing to their gender.

In his critical piece of writing, *Grotesque Realism and Grotesque Bodyin Bakhtin*, Francisco Benedito Leite opines that out of the "system of images in popular culture", one that is most prominent and representative of "grotesque realism" is "grotesque body", and it is the said "grotesque body" that would unravel the dynamics of identity, representation, alienation and agency in the lives of women of all times and ages. Juxtaposing the clean, untouched body against the revelation of the gore and brutality that resides within the body, the director successfully subverts the dominant phallocentric notions of purity and innocence. The film is intriguing, as it does not indulge in the depiction of any means of gore or violent sequences as such in the film, yet the audience is made to experience the shock and trauma in relation to the intense brutality perpetrated on the female body. As a visibly disturbed Austin comments, "First they bound her. Then they ripped out her tongue, poisoned her, paralyzed her, forced her to swallow the cloth" (her left molar pulled out and wrapped in a piece of cloth with Roman numerals written on it). "Then, uh, the cuts, the internal mutilation, stabs……they burned her" (42:41-43:05). The grotesque element in the film emanates from the corpse itself, as it is the evidence of all the savagery and inhumanity perpetrated on the supposed "Jane Doe". This is evident in Austin's words, "She's not just a body." As Reyes claims, that body horror, like any other horror, supposedly possesses a source of threat which needs to have an agency. In the said film the corpse forms both the source of fear and also projects the element of the grotesque.

Reyes states that not all body horror is bound by fear and disgust. The "negative emotions" harboured towards the transformed tend to subside "after a period of adaptation for the characters". Yet Reyes believes that body horror cannot let go of the "element of revulsion" within it. He argues that if not the characters themselves, then those around them would express their discomfort with the transformations, which would lead to "either… self-loathing or else the quest to annihilate the threat the strange body poses to the status quo" (*The Palgrave Handbook* 394). Even though the corpse of Jane Doe is devoid of any physical aberration or scars, it enables to arouse a sense of revulsion in the audience. Reyes observes that "fear is not synonymous with disgust". Horror films often tend to scare the audience, with the exception of only a handful of them that successfully evoke disgust. Reyes claims that disgust is both corporeal and cultural.

Body horror deals with disgust on two levels: On a primary one, body horror texts have recourse to images or scenarios where the human body is presented as somewhat disgusting; on a secondary level, body horror texts will, in engaging with disgusting presentations of the body, attempt to generate disgust in readers/viewers (*Palgrave* 395). In the film Jane Doe's corpse induces the fear of being targeted as she kills everything on her way. This accords with the fact that the said revulsion towards the corpse emanates not only from its abject status but also from the fear of being killed.

A closer analysis of "'the cultural and socio-political bias' in the functioning of disgust in body horror helps the understandings of the regulations of what is imaginative or visually permissible at any given time and thus of what and who is actively policed and marginalised by specific cultures and periods" (*Palgrave* 395).

This understanding is necessary to grasp the intensity of the oppressive conditioning to which women were subjected. Reyes argues that it is in this understanding one sees disgust cross over to abjection.

The film could be analysed in light of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection to navigate through the nuanced portrayal of the female body as an abject. Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* defines abject as anything that causes disturbance in "identity", "system", and "order" (Kristeva 4). Kristeva opines that in the biblical context, the corpse forms "one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul". For Reyes, abject is "the object or subject which transgresses conventional notions of the clean and the pure and must be cast out in order to reestablish the normative, operative in a similar way." It serves as an "excremental mirror", a narrative surface" reflecting an image, "unacceptable/baleful". The corpse of Jane Doe is unacceptable in the mortal realm, something that should be cast out, something that belongs to the world of the dead and decay. The film subverts the socially acceptable norm as the corpse becomes an overbearing, omnipresent figure in the film. The film fully revolves around Jane Doe's corpse, as the focus is on the inspection of the corpse in order to discover the cause of her death. The coroners, Tommy and Austin, engage in the procedure at various levels, namely external and internal examination. The professional and matter-of-fact tone used by the coroners, along with the depiction of the official process of recording the autopsy, provides a real-life experience for the audience. The setting of the coroner's house's basement as the autopsy room and the use of the various pieces of articles and tools for the dissection of the corpse (for instance, the rib-cutter used by Tommy Tilden to cut open Jane's ribs) add to the building up of the tense atmosphere of an autopsy lab in the film. The abject element in the film goes beyond the mere presence of Jane's corpse. As Reyes rightfully argues that "in body horror it is always possible to encounter the two sides of abjection, the corporeal and the social" (*Palgrave* 398).

Reyes reinstates that the abject can never be separated from the social spectrum of life (*Palgrave* 395). The abject in the film, Jane Doe's corpse, is a testament to the prevailing social condition of the feminine gender in the 1690s in Massachusetts. However, Jane's torment and inhuman experience are not region bound but rather universal. Tommy, in the initial stage of examination, suspects Jane to be a victim of sex trafficking and narrates the story of two teenage girls whose feet and hands were bound together in a manner similar to her corpse's condition (23:03). Reyes comments that abjection transgresses into "a tool through which to express the many forms stigmatisation and exclusion take in different periods for scholars in Gothic and Horror Studies." Abjection, further, "can help reveal the subjective underpinning of the social dehumanisation, be it governmental (systemic) or personal (a phobia or fear), of certain communities to the point where some lives may be perceived to be less important than others or even as wasteful" (*Palgrave* 395). This aspect is reflected in the Salem trials, where the lives of all those accused people were inconspicuous and avoidable in comparison to the larger group of people in the Massachusetts colony, and thereby the former group were subjected to gruesome ends so that the latter could survive and flourish. The film too presents an idea closer to the one shared by the seventeenth-century public trials and killings. The body of Jane Doe destroys all the lives, both human and animal (Tommy's cat Stanley gets fatally injured), whom she encounters. In Tommy's words, she kills everybody on her way. The roles have been reversed as Tommy and Austin attempt to burn the corpse; the fire catches the entire room, whereas the corpse survives without an inch of burn or scar (55:42).

Reyes claims that abjection is central to cultural representation, as he argues that "what is deemed 'other', 'monstrous' or 'disgusting' is ultimately determined by what, at any given point in history, is perceived as normative and protected as normal... understood as both a system of social and cultural monitoring" (*Palgrave* 395-97). Barbara Creed, in her seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis,* discusses the involvement of Christianity in overthrowing many of the previously existing pagan religions and rituals. The Catholic Church completely overthrew the status of witches as healers and midwives. Creed states that witchcraft was declared as "heresy" by the Catholic Church in the fourteenth century.

Creed looks into the play of gender in the accusations of witchcraft and practice of "devil worship":

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), an inquisitor's manual for witch prosecution which was commissioned by the Catholic Church and written by two Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, makes it clear that a central reason for the persecution of witches was morbid interest in the witch as 'other' and the fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration.

Creed also delineates the conditions prescribed in the manual to identify witches, and one of the central identifying factors was "the presence of an extra nipple somewhere on the body". Needless to say, the examinations were forceful and humiliating, where "women were stripped, shaved and searched (often publicly)" (Creed).

The variation in the proportion of the executed women to men lies in the gender-based hatred and ignorance subjected towards women, as presented in Creed's analysis of *Malleus Maleficarum,*

The Malleus Maleficarum also supplies a series of supposedly logical reasons why women are more inclined to witchcraft than men. The reasons all relate to the classic and phallocentric definition of woman as the 'other', the weaker but dangerous complement of man.

'What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!' (ibid.,43). The major reason given for woman's 'otherness' is her carnal nature. Women are less intelligent, less spiritual, more like children. 'But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations' (ibid.,44). The Malleus Maleficarum is permeated by an extreme hatred of women and fear of their imaginary powers of castration.

The Salem witch trials are symbolic of a historical instance where masses of women were subjected to public humiliation and execution based on theological accounts and accusations without valid evidence. The occurrence of the 1690s still holds massive influence upon the society and popular culture. The film *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* makes use of the trope of body horror to delineate the female body as a spectacle as well as a site of resistance and remembrance of the torture. Thus, the film transforms itself into an artefact of the historical event and will continue to live through the ages, and so will Jane Doe's corpse.

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THEORETICAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF RESISTANCE: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES OF IDENTITY, POWER, AND REPRESENTATION IN *BLACK PANTHER*

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Abstract

This scholarly investigation interrogates Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* as a critical cinematic text that fundamentally challenges dominant representational paradigms of race, gender, technology, and cultural identity. Employing a sophisticated multi-theoretical methodology integrating intersectionality, Afrofuturism, postcolonial feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory, the research examines how the film functions as a transformative epistemological intervention in contemporary cultural discourse.

The study reveals the film's complex narrative strategies that systematically deconstruct normative representations of marginalised subjectivities. Through nuanced analysis of character development, technological representation, and narrative architecture, the research demonstrates how *Black Panther* resists reductive categorical limitations and presents alternative conceptualisations of identity and power.

Key theoretical frameworks, including the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judith Butler, and Derrick Bell, provide critical hermeneutic approaches to analysing the film's sophisticated negotiation of systemic oppressive structures. The research illuminates how the cinematic text challenges colonial technological paradigms, reconstructs gender performativity, and articulates complex diasporic identity negotiations.

Ultimately, the study argues that *Black Panther* transcends traditional representational modes, offering a radical reimagination of collective human potential that simultaneously critiques historical oppressive narratives and envisions transformative alternative futures.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Cultural Representation, Gender Performance, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Theory, Racial Identity

Introduction

Contemporary cinema represents a critical site of cultural negotiation, where narrative architectures intersect with complex theoretical frameworks of identity, power, and resistance. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) emerges as a particularly sophisticated text that transcends conventional representational paradigms, offering a multidimensional exploration of race, gender, technology, and cultural identity. This research critically examines the film's narrative strategies through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, demonstrating how cinematic representation can function as a profound instrument of epistemological resistance.

The film's significance extends far beyond traditional superhero narrative conventions, presenting a nuanced investigation of marginalised subjectivities that challenges fundamental assumptions about cultural representation. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, representation is never neutral but constitutes a complex negotiation of power relations that fundamentally shape collective understanding (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 139). *Black Panther* provides a critical intervention in this representational landscape, presenting characters and narratives that resist reductive categorical limitations.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs a multi-theoretical approach, integrating five critical theoretical perspectives to comprehensively analyse the film's representational strategies:

1. Intersectionality Theory (Kimberlé Crenshaw)

2. Afrofuturism (Alondra Nelson, Mark Dery)

3. Postcolonial Feminist Theory (Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty)

4. Critical Race Theory (Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw)

5. Queer Theory (Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam)

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research include:

• Analysing the film's representation strategies beyond tokenistic diversity

• Investigating the complex performative dimensions of identity

• Examining how narrative structures challenge systemic oppressive configurations

• Exploring alternative conceptualisations of race, gender, and technological agency

• Demonstrating the transformative potential of cinematic representation

Significance of the Study

Black Panther represents more than a cinematic text; it functions as a critical technological intervention in contemporary cultural discourse. By employing multiple theoretical perspectives, this research reveals how popular media can serve as a sophisticated site of epistemological resistance and collective reimagination.

Intersectional Representation in *Black Panther*

In her seminal work on intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw posits that "the experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood in terms of being Black and being a woman considered independently, but must include the interactions between the two identities" (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 140). Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* presents a nuanced cinematic exploration of this theoretical construct, offering a complex narrative that deconstructs singular identity markers through its multidimensional character representations.

Female Characters: Intersectional Agency and Representation

Okoye: Disrupting Military Leadership Paradigms

Okoye, as the leader of the Dora Milaje, embodies an intersectional subject position that simultaneously challenges gender, racial, and professional stereotypes. Her character transcends traditional militaristic representations by presenting a form of leadership that integrates emotional intelligence with strategic prowess. When confronted with Killmonger's challenge to Wakandan leadership, Okoye articulates a profound ethical dilemma, stating, "I am loyal to that throne, no matter who sits upon it" – a statement that reveals the complexity of institutional loyalty intersected with personal moral agency.

Crenshaw's theoretical framework illuminates how Okoye's identity cannot be reduced to a singular dimension of gender or professional role. Her character represents a multiplicative interaction of race, gender, national identity, and professional capacity, demonstrating the intricate ways marginalised identities negotiate power structures.

Nakia: Humanitarian Activism and Political Negotiation

Nakia's character exemplifies the intersectional negotiation of gender, humanitarian ethics, and political agency. Her rejection of a purely domestic role within Wakandan society and her commitment to global humanitarian interventions challenge traditional conceptualisations of feminine political engagement. Her dialogue with T'Challa reveals a sophisticated understanding of transnational political responsibility: "I cannot be happy here knowing that there are people suffering outside our borders."

This narrative trajectory aligns with Crenshaw's assertion that intersectionality requires understanding multiple, interconnected systems of oppression. Nakia's character demonstrates how gender, national identity, and humanitarian ethics cannot be understood as independent categorical experiences.

Shuri: Technological Narrative and Intellectual Disruption

Shuri represents a radical deconstruction of racialised and gendered technological narratives. As the primary technological innovator of Wakanda, she challenges multiple stereotypical constraints – the gendered assumption of technological expertise, the racial marginalisation of Black intellectual capacity, and the traditional conceptualisation of scientific innovation.

Her sardonic critique of colonialism – "Great, another broken white boy for us to fix" – demonstrates a sophisticated intersectional consciousness that simultaneously addresses racial, technological, and geopolitical power dynamics.

Masculinity: Deconstructing Toxic Archetypes

T'Challa's leadership model provides a nuanced deconstruction of hypermasculine warrior tropes. Unlike traditional superhero narratives, his character integrates vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and collaborative leadership. His interactions with female characters – particularly Okoye, Nakia, and Shuri – reveal a model of masculinity predicated on mutual respect and collaborative agency.

The film's climactic scene, where T'Challa challenges the isolationist Wakandan paradigm, reflects an intersectional understanding of national identity: "More connects us than separates us." This statement embodies Crenshaw's theoretical perspective of interconnected identity systems that transcend simplistic categorical boundaries.

Black Panther emerges as a critical text for understanding intersectionality not as an abstract theoretical construct but as a lived, dynamic experience of identity negotiation. The film demonstrates that identity is neither monolithic nor static but a complex, iterative process of power navigation.

Decolonising Imagination: Afrofuturism and Technological Agency in *Black Panther*

Alondra Nelson conceptualises Afrofuturism as a "critical perspective that uses the imagined future to excavate and transform the tyrannical present" (Nelson, "Future Texts"). In *Black Panther*, this theoretical lens reveals a profound reimagination of Black technological potential and historical narrative, challenging hegemonic representations of African identity and technological agency.

Technological Sovereignty as Decolonial Resistance

Wakanda: A Metaphorical Technological Sanctuary

The film constructs Wakanda as an epistemological rupture in colonial technological narratives. Mark Dery's seminal articulation that Afrofuturism provides "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" finds profound manifestation in the film's representational strategy (Dery 180).

Wakanda emerges not merely as a geographical location but as an ontological challenge to Western technological epistemologies. Shuri's laboratory represents a radical decolonial space where technological innovation transcends colonial knowledge systems. Her dismissive response to Western technological paradigms – "Just because something works doesn't mean it cannot be improved" – emblematises a critical epistemic resistance.

Technological Innovation as Political Agency

Shuri's technological innovations systematically deconstruct multiple layers of colonial scientific discourse. Her development of advanced vibranium-based technologies – from medical innovations to sophisticated combat technologies – represents a profound reimagination of Black intellectual capacity.

The scene where Shuri equips T'Challa with technologically advanced equipment symbolises more than mere technological transfer; it signifies a radical reclamation of technological narrative. As Nelson argues, Afrofuturism provides "a way of contemplating and experiencing blackness that is not defined by oppression" (Nelson, "Future Texts").

Spatial and Temporal Reimagining

Disrupting Colonial Geographical Narratives

Black Panther radically challenges conventional geographical representations of Africa. Wakanda emerges as a technological utopia untouched by colonial extraction, presenting an alternative historical trajectory. The film's opening sequence, which reveals Wakanda's hidden technological sophistication, directly challenges dominant narratives of African technological underdevelopment.

T'Challa's transformative speech at the United Nations – "We must find a way to look after one another as a global community" – represents a fundamental reimagining of international relations beyond colonial power structures.

Alternative Conceptualisation of African Identity

The film constructs African identity as multidimensional, technologically advanced, and inherently sovereign. Unlike colonial representations that positioned Africa as a site of primitive existence, Wakanda emerges as a complex, technologically sophisticated civilisation.

Killmonger's character provides a nuanced exploration of diasporic identity, challenging linear historical narratives. His critique, "Where was Wakanda?", interrogates historical silences and collective trauma, demonstrating how Afrofuturism can address complex postcolonial experiences.

Challenging Linear Historical Progression

Wakanda's technological ecosystem represents a non-linear temporal conception. The civilisation simultaneously exists in multiple temporal registers – traditional and hyper-modern – challenging Western linear conceptualisations of progress.

Shuri's technological lab epitomises this temporal complexity. Her technologies blend traditional African aesthetics with futuristic design, creating a unique epistemological space that resists simplistic categorisations of technological development.

Black Panther emerges as a critical Afrofuturist text that goes beyond representation, functioning as a transformative narrative technology. It provides what Dery describes as "a program for cultural decolonization" (Dery 182), reimagining Black subjectivity beyond colonial constraints.

Deconstructing Imperial Configurations

Gayatri Spivak's seminal interrogation of subaltern representation provides a critical lens for analysing *Black Panther*, particularly her assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" without challenging existing representational paradigms (Spivak 104). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of homogenising Western feminist discourses further illuminates the film's complex negotiation of gender, power, and postcolonial subjectivity.

Indigenous Gender Power Dynamics

Autonomous Female Agency

The film's female characters fundamentally destabilise colonial gender configurations through their multidimensional political and military agency. Okoye, leader of the Dora Milaje, embodies a radical rejection of both Western feminist narratives and patriarchal indigenous structures. Her declaration, "I am loyal to that throne, no matter who sits upon it," demonstrates a complex negotiation of institutional loyalty that transcends simplistic gender binaries.

Nakia's humanitarian activism represents an alternative mode of political engagement that challenges both imperial interventionist models and traditional patriarchal governance. Her insistence on Wakanda's global responsibility – "I cannot be happy here knowing that there are people suffering outside our borders" – articulates a transnational feminist consciousness that resonates with Mohanty's critique of essentialist cultural representations.

Collective Female Leadership

The Wakandan governance model presents a radical deconstruction of patriarchal power structures. The film depicts female characters as integral to political decision-making, with Queen Ramonda, Nakia, and Okoye functioning as key strategic agents. This collective leadership model challenges what Spivak describes as the "continuing production of the 'third world' as a singular, monolithic subject" (Spivak 92).

Diasporic Identity and Postcolonial Subjectivity

Killmonger as Complex Postcolonial Subject

Erik Killmonger emerges as a nuanced embodiment of diasporic trauma and postcolonial resistance. His character represents what Mohanty conceptualises as the "complex understanding of the colonialist/racist/patriarchal power structures" (Mohanty 338). Killmonger's critique articulates the profound psychological and historical violence of diaspora:

"Where was Wakanda? While people were being enslaved, colonized, and killed, you were watching from the shadows!"

This powerful indictment reveals the complex negotiations of belonging, historical trauma, and collective responsibility that characterise postcolonial diasporic experience.

Deconstructing Imperial Gender Configurations

Resistance to External Patriarchal Interventions

The film systematically deconstructs imperial gender dynamics through its representation of Wakandan sovereignty. T'Challa's leadership model challenges both Western imperial masculinity and traditional patriarchal configurations. His ultimate rejection of isolationism and embrace of global responsibility represent a nuanced negotiation of national and transnational feminist consciousness.

The confrontation between T'Challa and Killmonger becomes a metaphorical site of postcolonial identity negotiation, where competing narratives of resistance and belonging are interrogated. Their dialogue reveals the complex intergenerational trauma of colonial dispossession.

Black Panther functions as a critical text that goes beyond mere representation, offering a sophisticated deconstruction of postcolonial gender dynamics. The film provides what Spivak describes as a "persistent critique of the subject-constituting character of power" (Spivak 111).

Through its nuanced narrative architecture, *Black Panther* operationalises postcolonial feminist theory, presenting a radical reimagination of gender, power, and diasporic identity that challenges both imperial and indigenous patriarchal configurations.

Deconstructing Racial Narratives

Derrick Bell's foundational assertion that "racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society" provides a critical interpretive lens for analysing *Black Panther* as a cinematic text of racial negotiation and resistance (Bell, "Faces" 157). Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical interventions illuminate the film's sophisticated deconstruction of monolithic racial representations.

Representational Politics: Beyond Tokenistic Diversity

Subverting Hollywood's Racial Iconography

Black Panther fundamentally disrupts historical cinematic representations of Black subjectivity. Unlike traditional Hollywood narratives that marginalise Black characters or reduce them to stereotypical tropes, the film presents a complex ecosystem of Black agency, intellect, and multidimensional characterisation.

Shuri's character emblematises this representational revolution. Her technological brilliance, sardonic wit, and intellectual sovereignty directly challenge long-standing cinematic representations of Black intellectual capacity. Her dismissive rejoinder to Western technological paradigms – "Just because something works doesn't mean it cannot be improved" – serves as a metanarrative critique of systemic racial epistemological limitations.

Complex Character Architectures

Each character manifests a nuanced racial subjectivity that resists reductive categorisation. As Crenshaw argues, "Identity is not a simple algorithm" (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 140). The film's characters emerge as complex subjects negotiating intricate power dynamics rather than flat representational instruments.

Systemic Oppression and Revolutionary Consciousness

Killmonger's Radical Genealogy of Resistance

Erik Killmonger represents a sophisticated articulation of diasporic revolutionary consciousness. His character embodies what Derrick Bell conceptualises as the "interest convergence" theory – a critical examination of how racial progress occurs only when it simultaneously serves dominant power structures (Bell, "Interest" 523).

Killmonger's profound indictment – "Where was Wakanda? While people were being enslaved, colonised, and killed, you were watching from the shadows!" – articulates a radical critique of both global racial inequities and complicitous silences within Black diasporic experiences.

Historical Violence and Collective Trauma

The film provides a nuanced exploration of historical violence that transcends simplistic narratives of racial reconciliation. Killmonger's character arc demonstrates the intergenerational psychological trauma produced by systemic racist structures, presenting a complex genealogy of resistance that refuses normative reconciliation narratives.

Structural Power Dynamics

Reimagining Institutional Power

Wakanda emerges as a critical site of institutional power reconstruction. The film's governance model presents an alternative conceptualisation of political sovereignty fundamentally disconnected from colonial epistemological frameworks.

T'Challa's transformative United Nations speech – "We must find a way to look after one another as a global community" – represents a radical reimagination of international relations beyond extractive colonial logics.

Black Panther functions as a critical text that goes beyond mere representation, offering a sophisticated deconstruction of racial narrative construction. The film provides what Bell describes as a "racial literacy" that reveals the complex mechanisms of systemic oppression (Bell, "Faces" 162).

Deconstructing Normative Masculinities

Judith Butler's seminal conceptualisation of gender as a performative construct provides a critical hermeneutic framework for analysing "*Black Panther*'s" sophisticated negotiation of gender identity. As Butler posits, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a doing rather than a being" (Butler, "Performative" 25). Jack Halberstam's theoretical interventions further illuminate the film's deconstruction of normative masculinity and gender performativity.

Challenging Binary Gender Representations

Performative Dimensions of Identity

The film's narrative architecture systematically dismantles essentialist gender configurations, presenting masculinity as a complex, multidimensional performative construct. T'Challa's leadership model emerges as a radical departure from hegemonic masculine archetypes, embodying what Halberstam describes as "alternative modalities of gendered embodiment" (Halberstam 6).

The intricate interactions between male characters reveal a nuanced performance of gender that transcends binary conceptualisations. W'Kabi's emotional vulnerability during his confrontation with T'Challa demonstrates a significant departure from traditional hypermasculine narrative structures. His complex emotional response challenges the notion of masculinity as a monolithic, affectively restricted identity.

Rejecting Toxic Masculinity

Alternative Masculinity Representations

Wakandan male characters systematically deconstruct normative masculinity through their emotional intelligence and collaborative leadership models. T'Challa's leadership paradigm represents a radical reimagination of masculine agency, characterised by emotional vulnerability and collective responsibility.

The scene where T'Challa engages with Shuri reveals a non-hierarchical familial dynamic that challenges patriarchal power structures. Their relationship demonstrates what Butler conceptualises as a "subversive performance" of gender relations (Butler, "Gender Trouble" 138), where traditional gender hierarchies are fundamentally destabilised.

Emotional Vulnerability as Resistance

Killmonger's character provides a complex exploration of masculinity's performative dimensions. His violent revolutionary consciousness emerges not as a simplistic expression of toxic masculinity but as a nuanced negotiation of historical trauma and diasporic identity.

The intimate moment between Erik and his father represents a profound deconstruction of normative masculine emotional repression. Their dialogue reveals the psychological complexity of generational masculine performance, challenging essentialist understandings of gender identity.

Non-Normative Gender Expressions

Institutional Gender Configurations

The Dora Milaje represents a radical institutional performance of gender that fundamentally challenges normative military and political configurations. Okoye's leadership model demonstrates what Halberstam describes as "female masculinity" – a performative mode of gender that transcends binary categorisations (Halberstam 15).

Her declaration of loyalty – "I am loyal to that throne, no matter who sits upon it" – articulates a complex negotiation of institutional belonging that exists beyond simplistic gender determinisms.

Theoretical Implications

Black Panther functions as a critical text that goes beyond mere representation, offering a sophisticated deconstruction of gender performativity. The film provides what Butler conceptualises as a "subversive reconfiguration of gender" that challenges fundamental ontological assumptions about identity (Butler, "Gender Trouble" 145).

Conclusion

Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* emerges as a transformative cinematic text that fundamentally challenges and reimagines representational paradigms of race, gender, technology, and cultural identity. Through a sophisticated multi-theoretical analysis employing intersectionality, Afrofuturism, postcolonial feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory, the film reveals itself as a complex site of epistemological resistance and narrative reconstruction.

The film's representational strategy transcends tokenistic diversity, presenting a nuanced ecological system of identity that defies monolithic categorisations. Characters are not merely representational instruments but complex subjects negotiating intricate matrices of power, historical trauma, and collective agency. The multiplicative interactions of race, gender, class, and national identity demonstrate what Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualises as the fundamental interconnectedness of systemic oppression.

Okoye, Nakia, and Shuri exemplify this intersectional complexity, challenging singular identity markers through their multidimensional political, intellectual, and military agencies. Their characters deconstruct both colonial and indigenous patriarchal configurations, presenting alternative modalities of female subjectivity that resist external and internal oppressive structures.

The Afrofuturist framework reveals *Black Panther* as a profound technological narrative of decolonial resistance. Wakanda emerges not merely as a geographical location but as an ontological challenge to Western technological epistemologies. Shuri's technological innovations represent a radical reclamation of Black intellectual potential, challenging colonial scientific paradigms and presenting an alternative historical and futural narrative.

The film's technological ecosystem simultaneously exists in multiple temporal registers, challenging linear conceptualisations of progress and presenting a sophisticated critique of colonial technological discourse. As Alondra Nelson argues, this represents a critical perspective that uses imagined futures to transform oppressive present conditions. Killmonger's character provides a nuanced exploration of diasporic identity, embodying the complex negotiations of belonging, historical trauma, and revolutionary consciousness. His narrative arc articulates a profound critique of both global racial inequities and the complicitous silences within diasporic experiences.

The film's exploration of systemic oppression goes beyond mere representation, offering a sophisticated deconstruction of racial narrative construction. It provides what Derrick Bell conceptualises as a "racial literacy" that reveals the intricate mechanisms of systemic oppression while simultaneously imagining alternative collective futures. Through a queer theoretical lens, *Black Panther* radically reimagines masculinity, challenging binary gender representations and exploring the performative complexity of identity. Male characters demonstrate emotional vulnerability, reject toxic masculine archetypes, and present alternative models of leadership and interpersonal engagement.

Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender as a performative construct finds profound manifestation in the film's narrative architecture. Characters like T'Challa and W'Kabi reveal masculinity as a complex, multidimensional performative construct that transcends essentialist understandings.

Black Panther functions as a critical intervention in contemporary cultural representation, demonstrating how popular media can serve as a powerful site of theoretical and social transformation. The film does not merely represent marginalised identities but actively constructs alternative epistemological frameworks that challenge dominant narrative structures. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, the analysis reveals the film's sophisticated negotiation of identity, power, and resistance. It demonstrates how cinematic narratives can function as complex theoretical technologies that reimagine collective possibilities beyond oppressive historical constraints.

The multidimensional theoretical analysis of *Black Panther* illuminates the film's profound potential as a transformative cultural text. Through its nuanced representations, the film challenges fundamental assumptions about race, gender, technology, and cultural identity, offering a radical reimagination of collective human potential.

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ETCHED IN FLESH: CULTURE, BODY AND THE LANGUAGE OF INK

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Abstract

Culture and Body are the central concerns of discussion since time immemorial. Where culture is defined as the performance of the body in a socio-political circumstance, while the body is the site where the different patterns of culture are inscribed and performed. As it is a dynamic entity, it is continuously shaped by the individualistic perception of the culture. The skin, in particular, serves as a metaphorical and concrete canvas where multiple interplays of meanings are inscribed and negotiated in the form of tattoos. It is a visual representation of ideology, which offers insights into how the body is represented, interpreted, and imbued with meaning across various societies. In this context, tattoos emerge as a vital area of inquiry which symbolically connects the mind-body duo, and it varies from person to person, thus making the interpretation a complex and contested process.

Tattoos are the permanent markings on the skin, which encompass a wide spectrum of cultural expressions, particularly in societies where the body is subjected to rigid rules, norms and regulations. It also reflects broader themes of identity, resistance, and agency. Tattoo is an embodiment of the emotional and psychological dimensions of the body, where traumatic experiences, social stigmatisation, and cultural expectations leave visible marks on it. In such contexts, the tattoos become both a symbol of subjugation and a medium of resistance, where individuals reclaim autonomy of their body.

This paper critically examines the binary nature of the skin in relation to tattoos—where it functions both as an instrument of socio-political control and as a space for emotional expression and reclamation of the self.

Key words: Culture, body, tattoos, trauma, identity, resistance, power, social stigmatisation, autonomy of the body.

Culture and Body have been the central topics of scholarly discussion from time immemorial. Body Culture Studies is an academic discipline which explores the various aspects of bodily practices within a larger heterogeneous cultural context. Culture is articulated and propagated through bodily adornments and art forms. Culture can be understood as the totality of performances enacted by a social body within a particular socio-political framework. It is encoded and decoded through the body, especially through bodily ornaments such as clothing, jewellery, modifications, and piercing. Such practices not only improve the aesthetic quality of the body but also function as a cultural text which contains the nuances of culture. Since culture is dynamic, it undergoes various transformations influenced by temporal, spatial, and ideological constraints. In the words of Edward Tylor, "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor 1). This paper is grounded in Cultural Studies, Postmodernism, and Body and Identity Politics to examine how tattoos operate in contemporary popular culture.

Every society has their own cultural patterns and traditions, which encompass the overall performance of human and non-human agencies. Every aspect of human life, from mundane activities to significant life events, is knitted within the fabrics of culture and interpreted through cultural frameworks. So, the most minute personal attributes—such as dress, speech, gestures, and body modifications—are subject to cultural interpretation and social surveillance. As it is a dynamic entity, it changes according to the spatial and time components.

Cultural production and transmission occur across generations through various methods. Body art is one among them. The mobile and dynamic nature of the body reinforces the plurality as well as the uniqueness of different cultural aspects. A body becomes a social entity when it actively participates in the cultural performances, embodying and expressing the values, norms, and ideologies of its community.

Body is a key site in the arena of cultural studies, in which various cultural identities are expressed and articulated. Scholars have examined how bodies have been represented, performed, and inscribed within culturally sensitive spaces. The body is not a mere biological entity, but it is a sociocultural construct through which various social agencies manifest their cultural expression. Body is the prime medium in which the dynamic nature of culture is projected and manifested.

Art elevates the concept of the body and positions it on a loftier level. It not only enhances the performativity of the body but also provides an identity to it.

For instance, artistic representations such as body art and body modification like tattoos and piercings, where the body serves as an embodiment of cultural inscription that reflects and negotiates cultural ideologies, expectations, and norms. So, the body turns into a semiotic site where different meanings are encoded and decoded.

In contemporary cultural studies, the body is viewed as a fluid and performative construct. So, the meaning of the body changes according to the codes attributed to that. Various body modification and art forms play a vital role in fixing a body and freezing its identity within a hegemonic cultural context. Tattoos, in particular, sketched on the skin, act as a corporeal adornment which elevates the body into an ideological text rather than a biological entity. It offers a valuable insight into the cultural palette in which that body belongs. Tattoo is a cultural tool which projects the identity of the ideal self. A tattooed body acts as a semiotic unique body which has the capability to narrate the visual text encoded in it.

There are several research articles that explore the connection between tattoo and body, tattoo as a semiotic marker, the role of tattoo in identity formation, tattooed people as the deviant other and so on. A tattoo is not only a visual symbol but also a marker which makes a body unique. It varies according to persons and social trends. More than a mere decorative device, sometimes it functions as a purgatory device which aids the individual to channelise their emotions. It is a medium through which the body creates a sense of self and rebirth of the soul.

The tattoos can be considered as a body within a body which acts as a powerful mark of individuality. A tattoo is literally a body in progress, telling the story of past experiences and one's dreams regarding the future. So, tattoos can be considered as both a form of personal expression and a socially constructed practice, where meanings are attributed based on cultural contexts. In popular cultural contexts, tattooed bodies function as fashionable bodies which project their uniqueness and cultural trends.

The article titled *Popular Culture and Identity Formation: A StudyonTattooConsumption Practices among Urban Youth* by Shiva Thrishul and Tejasvi Jamjala proposes that the visibility of the tattoo in the popular culture represents an acceptance of tattoo as a legitimate art form because of the increase in its consumption by the youth. The tattooed people started legitimising their own tattoos by tattooing narratives that ascribe semantic meaning to their images. The identity formation of the youth through bodily tattoo is enabling them to express their ideology through the social skin. Widespread tattoo consumption among the youth reveals how informal social control and judgements about socio-economic status play out in the realm of popular culture and personal embodiment. (Thrishul and Jamjala 68).

Another research article titled *Tattoos and Popular Culture: Cultural Representations of Ink* by Lee Baron explores the relation between tattoos and generations, especially Millennials and Gen Z, and also the role of tattoos in mainstream culture. (Baron) In ancient times tattooing was part of crime and deviant normalcy. Currently, the same becomes the part of freak shows which claims the autonomy of the body. The article entitled *Ink on Skin: A Cultural Exploration of the History and Significance of Tattoos* by Hirak Jyoti Medhi explores the historical and cultural significance of tattoos in different societies, including the ways in which they have been used to mark social status, express identity, and commemorate important life events. (Hirak and Medhi 728)

The word 'tattoo' is said to have come from the Tahitian language, which means to mark in the sense that the body is marked by using a sharp hunting tool to insert a dye under the surface of the skin. Such practices are part of ensuring solidarity among the community. In Northeast India, such tattoo practices exist. They tattooed to show their kinship with the community and to mark the purity of their skin. In popular culture such traditional symbols are tattooed as part of fashion without knowing their actual meaning.

The meanings of tattoos vary across gender, race, and class—tattooed women, for instance, navigate different cultural expectations than men. In many tribal cultures, tattoos have been used to signify different stages of life, demarcating transitions such as puberty, marriage, and warrior status. Gender plays a pivotal role in determining the design of tattoos and the age to be tattooed. In certain communities' tattoos function as a medium for gender expression, resistance, and self-fashioning. In Northeast India, some tribal communities are tattooed to show the transition stage in their lives, especially women.

Tattooing is an ancient practice in India, especially among tribal and indigenous communities, where it has historically functioned as an essential marker of identity, valour, bravery, and loyalty. For these communities, tattoos are not merely decorative elements but symbols of deep personal and collective significance.

They encode narratives of ancestry, social status, rites of passage, and spiritual beliefs, forming an integral part of group solidarity. Some tattoos serve as protective talismans, which are believed to guard the bearer in both life and the afterlife.

Such as the tribal communities in India are tattooed to get protection in their afterlife. They strongly believe that such practices and visual symbols help them to save their lives and protect them from the cruel punishment in hell.

While tattoos were once deeply embedded in the collective identity of tribal societies, their meaning and function have evolved significantly within contemporary popular culture. In modern urban contexts, tattoos are often associated with individualism and self-expression, representing a departure from traditional collective communal symbolism. Instead of reinforcing social cohesion and kinship, contemporary tattoo culture frequently emphasises personal identity, making the tattooed individual distinct and unique from the rest of the society. Unlike traditional tattoos, which symbolised unity, group solidarity and shared heritage, modern tattoos often function as abstract representations of personal ideology, experiences, emotions, and psychological states. They narrate significant life events, memorialise relationships, or serve as symbols of resistance and empowerment. It acts as a social tool which makes that person different from the rest.

In the modern context, a tattoo acts as a signifier, the concept of body modification as the signified, and a socially 'dis-eased' body as the sign. Tattoos serve as cultural texts, reflecting subcultural identity, rebellion, and mainstream appropriation. Media representation of tattoos influences how society perceives tattooed bodies—shifting from stigmatisation to commodification. The concept of encoding/decoding is relevant here. In the communicative sphere, tattooed bodies are encoded with meanings by cultural producers such as celebrities, media, and brands, but audiences decode them differently based on their social context.

Within this shifting cultural landscape, tattoos emerge as a critical site of inquiry, symbolically linking the mind and body. The subjective nature of tattoo interpretation makes the process complex and contested, as each tattoo carries unique meanings for both the bearer and the observer. It is encoded according to the social context of the bearer and decoded according to the context of the observer.

At the same time, tattoos offer individuals a means of reclaiming bodily autonomy, challenging societal norms that seek to regulate and discipline the body. The permanence of tattoos signifies a deliberate act of self-definition, where the ideal self, as conceived by the mind, is inscribed upon the skin. One of the reasons people get tattoos on their bodies is to express themselves or their identity. When people have a life experience that they will cherish, it will be expressed in their bodies as a reminder of self-expression, which resulted in a tattoo.

Tattoos generally convey multiple meanings for their bearer. First, the tattoo functions as a ritual. In a culture in which there are few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can serve as a physical mark of a life event. These life events are significant for the bearer, not for the society. It indicates a great turn or shifts in the life of the bearer. The tattoo also functions as identification. By inscribing established symbols on the body, the tattooee is identifying him/herself as part of a given group. As in the tribal tattoos, it indicates the solidarity, unity and cohesion among the group members. Groups can be as broad or very specific, such as a family or partner's name. A third function of tattooing is protective. The tattoo can be a symbol or talisman to protect its bearer from general or specific harm. Sanders relates an interview with a man who had a tattoo of a fierce and angry bee inscribed on his arm. The man told Sanders that he was allergic to bees and had been stung so much that his physician feared the next sting might prove fatal. Having decided on the needed protection against bees, the man decided to get a bee tattoo/talisman to frighten the bees from stinging him again. Finally, the fourth function of tattoos is decorative. Regardless of their particular psychosocial function for the individual, tattoos are images which modify the body according to the socio-cultural pattern. By modifying the body with tattoos, the individual has chosen to add permanent decoration to his/her body. This decorative function is often associated with the exhibitionist nature of the tattoo bearers. (Sanders 47).

Although there is indeed an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing the tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual's stylishness, identifying a group to which they belong, and demonstrating their rebelliousness or uniqueness in one's life. The desire to conceal can stem from the deeply personal meaning of the tattoo for the individual or from the deeply embedded social stigma. While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from one's peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reactions they get from others, especially from the dear and near ones.

Tattoos have transitioned from countercultural resistance to mass-market aesthetics such as Instagram tattoo trends. Baudrillard's simulacrum concept can be applied here; tattoos in popular culture often lack original cultural significance, existing as fashionable signs rather than deeply personal or ritualistic symbols. The commodification of the body: Tattoos are now branded and commercialised.

From antiquity to the present, tattooing in India has encompassed a vast spectrum of cultural expressions. Among tribal communities, tattoos were often considered inalienable ornaments—unlike material jewellery, they could not be stolen or lost. This notion underscores the deep-rooted belief that tattoos are not merely aesthetic but serve as enduring markers of identity and resilience. However, in modern contexts, tattoos function as a more fluid and individualised form of self-representation, often reflecting personal aesthetics, beliefs, and experiences.

In popular culture, tattoo plays a creative role, as the body is a mobile entity; tattoo acts as a narrative medium in which various patterns of cultural codes are encoded. Even though the practice of tattooing is painful, the pain leads to the reclamation of the self. Ultimately, tattoos exist at the intersection of tradition and modernity, community and individuality, and permanence and transformation. As both a historical practice and a contemporary cultural phenomenon, tattoos continue to challenge and redefine the concepts in which the body is inscribed, performed, deciphered and understood within different socio-cultural frameworks. Whether as a symbol of collective belonging or a statement of personal autonomy, tattooing remains a powerful means of negotiating identity in an ever-changing cultural landscape.

Thus, the body remains central to the discourse of cultural studies, as it serves as both a canvas and an agent of cultural production. Whether through aesthetic modifications, disciplinary mechanisms, or performative acts, the body is constantly engaged in processes of meaning-making and deciphering. As cultural landscapes continue to evolve, the ways in which bodies are read, inscribed, and performed will remain critical to understanding identity, agency, and social belonging.

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MAN ENOUGH: HOW MASCULINITIES THROUGH THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP SHAPE RANBIR KAPOOR'S FILMS

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Abstract

The relationship between cinema, culture and society has been the subject of prominent scholarship, with masculinity being one of the comparatively more recent and necessary theoretical interventions. This research paper brings in masculinity and its manifestations with respect to the father as depicted through the characters played by Ranbir Kapoor in select movies. It examines how Freudian theory on father complex, feminist and masculinity theories explain the cultural evolution of the Hindi male hero by dissecting the films of a single actor. The idea is to discern the patterns of masculinities by closely analysing each movie within the relevant cultural context. Conclusively, the paper finds that the influence of the father becomes pivotal in shaping the expression of maleness as well as the dissonance or consonance with the patriarchal notions of masculinity adopted by Ranbir's characters.
Keywords: *Bollywood, culture, film, feminism, masculinity, psychoanalysis, Ranbir Kapoor*

Introduction

Within the recent decade, crucial debates have emerged surrounding cinema, the art and ethics of filmmaking, social commentaries, enquiries into propaganda and so on, including movies within the Indian landscape. The relationship between cinema and its audience as well as the bounds of creative freedom of the creators have come under scrutiny by critics, viewers, the government, and academia. The trends which these dynamics are presently undergoing pertain mainly to nationalism, religion, appropriate representation, and feminist critique. In light of the increase in these trends and the production of discourse on them, the latest Ranbir Kapoor starrer *Animal* by director Sandeep Reddy Vanga became the subject of glorification for the male audience identifying with hypermasculine ideology and that of resentment for the rest. The verdicts were split into various aspects of cinematography, writing, toxic masculinity, Vanga's explicit attack on "woke" critics and feminists, and lastly, overused tropes.

Here, a certain section of the internet identified this pattern of complicated father-son relationships, or as the social media creator Pulkit Kochar labels it under Gen Z humour, the *cinematic universe of "daddy issues"* (Kochar), which Ranbir Kapoor's movies resonate with. This observation makes up for an opportunity to explore how his characters and movies following the said trope have dealt with the representation of father-son relationships, masculinity, Ranbir's own stardom and how the audience might have responded to these cues. The paper will analyse the following movies through the framework of masculinity, psychoanalysis, and feminism: *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* (2009) by Rajkumar Santoshi, *Tamasha* (2015) by Imtiaz Ali, and *Animal* (2023) by Sandeep Reddy Vanga.

In line with the same, the research topic shall aim to address the notions of masculinity as portrayed across the career of an actor with remarkable popularity and to add to the literature on the exchange between cinema and culture. Therefore, the primary idea is to understand how the portrayal of Ranbir Kapoor's characters' dynamics with the father in the story develops the trajectory of their masculinity.

Review of Literature

The steadily growing literature understands the concept of masculinity as one that is temporally, socially, and historically fluid, implicating masculinity as a social construction of a "real" man as deemed fitting by a society at a particular point in time, usually in opposition to the feminine and the queer (Dasgupta and Gokulsing; Gurkan and Serttas). Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinities, cited as a focal point in several papers, suggests that there are multiple expressions of masculinity which create a hierarchy of male privilege (Connell) with the upper-class, traditional heterosexual male at the topmost rung. Within the Indian context, according to Mubarki's texts, hegemonic masculinity has developed in tandem with the Hindutva identity of the upper-caste, upper-class male who embodies patriarchy, aggression, traditionalism, emotional restraint, and entitlement (Mubarki).

Such reiterations solidify a stereotypical standard the society hails high, hampering other spheres of social interaction for men, like mental health and interpersonal relationships. Research on this explains the harm caused by patriarchal norms on men conforming with non-hegemonic masculinities and traditional masculinity, with the latter lacking in emotional support networks as they follow the idea of being an independent "lone wolf" (Edwards). According to Sivakumar and Manimekalai's analysis of the relationship between masculinity and cultural norms in Indian society, men's experiences are still shaped by traditional male values like strength and stoicism.

These expectations are frequently raised in the setting of Indian cinema, where gendered ideas of male identity are reinforced by the media (Sivakumar and Manimekalai). These intricate relationships are frequently negotiated in Kapoor's performances, which show the pressure of cultural expectations as well as the conflicts brought on by shifting social perceptions of masculinity.

In her discussion of Bollywood's aestheticisation of masculinity, Deckha also adds to this subject. She contends that emotional complexity and vulnerability are becoming more and more crucial to how male roles are portrayed in modern movies.

Kapoor's performances, which frequently entail tensions between father and son or clashes with paternal expectations, effectively express this change in the visual representation of masculinity in Indian cinema. His portrayals of Indian manhood represent a dramatic shift from the heroic, hyper-masculine protagonists of old Bollywood to more complex, emotionally introspective individuals (Deckha). The scholar's theory on the aestheticisation of masculinity, where emotional depth complements physicality, is mirrored in Kapoor's character Ved in *Tamasha* (2015), who struggles with societal constraints and a broken connection with his father.

Patriarchy, as a system of power, also interferes in the experience of fatherhood, as the men are either physically or emotionally absent from the child's life, following and strengthening gender norms within parenthood. Additionally, the male child's perception and experience of the father-son relationship tend to have an impact on his mental health, development of self-identity, and expressions of masculinity. (Strasser). In order to comprehend the father-son dynamic in Kapoor's works, the psychoanalytic idea of the "father complex" has been important. Strasser investigates the ways in which this complex influence's male identity, specifically in relation to how sons interpret and internalise their fathers' projections. A recurrent topic in Kapoor's characters is the "unresolved tensions between fathers and sons", when the father's emotional abandonment or withdrawal causes serious psychological and personal problems. Kapoor's character in *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* (2009) is light-hearted and joyful, yet his absence of a strong father figure suggests that he needs emotional supervision, which echoes the conflicts Strasser describes in the "father complex". This is consistent with Collings et al.'s concept of "Daddy Issues", which links paternal ties to emotional and relational consequences in adulthood. These relationships frequently seem as crucial to the protagonists' emotional development in Kapoor's films, mirroring larger cultural concerns over the influence of fathers on contemporary Indian masculinity. According to psychoanalytic theories of masculinity, Kapoor's portrayal of Sanjay Dutt in *Sanju* (2018) highlights the psychological repercussions of paternal influence through his tumultuous connection with his father, Sunil Dutt. Finally, motivated by his father's heritage, Kapoor tackles darker, more aggressive facets of masculinity in *Animal* (2023).

Lastly, Sen offers a vital structure for comprehending Indian masculinity in a global setting. His writings demonstrate how Indian male identity is being continually shaped by cultural influences from around the world, leading to a hybridisation of conventional and modern ideas of masculinity (Sen). Within this globalising framework, Kapoor's portrayals illustrate the constant balancing act between regional cultural norms and more general, international standards of masculinity. Cinema and art, therefore, can become important sites of investigating these generational patterns of masculinities and the formulation of the male subject on screen through commodified, fetishised and idealised male bodies and behaviour. Cinematic reproductions then establish aspirational and skewed images of "ideal" masculinity (Mubarki).

Methods and Methodology

The relationship between cinema, culture and society has been the subject of prominent scholarship, with masculinity being one of the comparatively more recent and necessary theoretical interventions. This research paper brings in masculinity and its manifestations with respect to the father as depicted through the characters played by Ranbir Kapoor in select movies. By employing the concept of the "father wound" or the Freudian theory on father complex, the paper explores the characters' dynamics to determine the effect the figure of the father has on the selfhood of the male protagonist. It utilises the principles of the theory in tandem with expressions of masculinities in order to articulate how the movies' narrative exists in consonance or dissonance with them, examining thereby whether the popular assertion of the existence of a "cinematic universe of father issues" with respect to Ranbir Kapoor's movies upholds.

The paper begins its understanding of masculinities from the framework tailored by RW Connell, contextualising it using the work of Indian gender and masculinity theorists like Kulkarni, Gokulsing (2013), and Dasgupta (2013). In tandem with feminist theory on cinema, masculinity and femininity, the paper will also analyse and critique the treatment of women in these movies, determining the impact of their positions and presence with reference to the male protagonist. The research will engage with the movies through the method of textual analysis.

The approach would include critiquing the films as well as the characters through the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, commenting on how they construct different or similar ideals of the male masculine image of the Bollywood film hero as attached with Ranbir Kapoor.

Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani (2009)

The genre of romantic comedy in Bollywood has arguably been a popular one, ranging from nuanced portrayals of relationships like *Jaane Tu… Ya Jaane Na* (2008) and light-hearted but retrospectively problematic ones like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). This Rajkumar Santoshi movie, unfortunately, falls into the latter category, which makes it a little difficult to engage with the topic at hand.

The male protagonist, Prem Sharma, is a middle-class Brahmin man, President of "Happy Club" (read: unemployed) and fits the profile of the unrealistically good-looking, emotionally intelligent, and selfless romantic hero who does not resort to violence (Gurkan and Serttas). The last two qualities are what contrast the romantic hero from how the action hero in Hindi cinema is constructed.

Prem's father is the hegemonic figure at home who portrays a traditionally masculine father with his "tough love" and distanced relationship with the child. This emotional distance leaves space only for conversations pertaining to the child's "security" as ensured through education and career choices, taking away the scope for the father to get involved in their emotional development. This onus usually falls on the mother then, making her an active contributor to how the child perceives relationships, gender roles and emotional vulnerability. Thus, even in the movie, Prem's emotions are nurtured and supported by his mother and his group of friends. While these relationships of his show the affective flexibility within masculinities which can foster healthy and communicative support systems among peers, without any underlying devices ridiculing such a supportive network as homosexual in favour of hypermasculine, rigid, "brotherly" bonds, Prem often finds his self-esteem to be slightly weakened at the thought of not meeting his father's ideals of pride and integrity. This is where the viewer receives his admission of wanting to make his father proud and acknowledge his value.

Here, one can also note the impact of positive verbal feedback in building one's sense of self and self-esteem. Having exchanged mainly negative conversations with the father, Prem's appraisal and conduct of himself transform from Jenny's (played by Katrina Kaif) verbal acknowledgement of his qualities and capabilities. As is the case with most heroes of a romantic movie, his character too betters himself due to the female protagonist's influence. Unlike the action hero's bruteness, the romantic hero stretches himself thin to sway verdicts in his favour, an act looked down upon by hypermasculine movies which show women as subservient and characters easily malleable to suit the hero's whims.

Though Prem's masculinity does not correspond to the traditional notions of the masculine hero, he is secure in it. In one of the scenes, he must wear Jenny's top so that his father does not find out about her hiding in their home, right when a suitor and her family are expected to visit them. He is casually having a conversation with them while dressed in it, and even though the father of the suitor angrily mocks him for being gay solely based on clothing, he is not affected by it in the least.

Therefore, Prem's masculinity is constructed in stark contrast to that of his father. Despite the lack of emotional expression and confirmation of Prem's worth by his father, he is depicted as a person encompassing those absences as a strong presence and unrelenting support for his friends and for Jenny in particular. Prem's realisation of his masculinity takes on a different trajectory than his father's and highlights certain unwavering strengths of his own throughout the movie.

Tamasha (2015)

Imtiaz Ali's storytelling in this film departs from the more "realistic" portrayals of human life wherein instead of being mimetic realism, it takes the form of a literal *tamasha* or dramatic theatre, be it in terms of the visuals, the (often hyperbolic and exaggerated) dialogues, the lyricism in the songs or the various montages. This gives more liberty to the filmmakers in translating the complexities of the human psyche onscreen. This creative direction becomes the medium to translate Ved's (played by Ranbir Kapoor) vivid imagination in his childhood as well as the emotional turmoil and suppression he goes through during his adulthood.

From the very beginning, he is shown as a child who does not excel in studies but has a keen interest in storytelling, both as a listener and as a budding storyteller. However, stories do not necessarily earn you a livelihood, which is where his father interjects. Ved's father is a strict disciplinarian and embodies the traditionally masculine father. His predetermined route for his son's life is that of an engineering student who would go on to add to the family lineage's honour and status. Using the struggles of his predecessors, the father guilts Ved with a seemingly inescapable responsibility which effectively drains his creative self and pursuit. His imagination, having been attacked by a figure whose authority he lacks the power to overthrow, leads him to abandon a world where he was told he was special and capable, where he believed in himself but also in a purpose greater than himself.

Hence, suppression of one's own identity and aspirations, coupled with the pain that comes from playing the part of an everyday salaryman who works like a cog in the capitalist order, develops a subordinate masculine identity within him.

He becomes a common, disposable employee at a firm where ideas are churned, consumed, and discarded at the drop of a hat, perpetually stuck in the same cycle of events to the point that, once juxtaposed to a more free-spirited Tara (played by Deepika Padukone), he seems almost mechanical when they meet again.

Now, Ali's filmography utilises the female protagonist to transform the character arc of the male protagonist, though it does not take away from her own narrative and agency in the movie – a rare feat in Bollywood productions. *Tamasha* follows the same trope with a slight twist, focusing on Ved's confrontation with his denial of emotional turmoil and fragmented sense of self. In this manner, Tara becomes a catalyst for change that is not romanticised but shown as discomforting and disturbing for Ved's internalised trauma.

In multiple scenes, he speaks with his mirror reflection, instructing it to behave in line with what is expected of him by figures of male authority across his life. Tara, however, becomes a mirror which speaks back his suppressed truth for him to address, which brings out the fragility and the rage masking his vulnerability as a man.

Towards the conclusion of the movie, he faces the self that he left behind to appease his father's demands. Fractured realities and familial relationships led him to seek ways to fit into the definitions of him as prescribed by his father first, then his employer – both the people who never approved of his individuality either way. Ved reels into a dramatic monologue, narrating his story and feelings through characters he conceived of in his mind to convince his father so he could live his life and self-actualise his identity on his own terms.

Animal (2023)

Vanga's recent cinematic venture caused a massive stir amongst the viewers, critics, and filmmakers alike with a movie allegedly about a son's unrelenting love for his father. The movie itself begins with an older Ranbir Kapoor recounting how his father's busy work life was the cause of his prolonged absences throughout his childhood, especially on his father's own birthday. The childhood memories of Ranvijay (played by Ranbir Kapoor) have been shown to be marked with him constantly seeking his presence, affection, and approval. The father, Balbir Singh (played by Anil Kapoor), on the other hand, expresses his regret of not having been able to "train" his son properly. The usage of the said term in place of "raise" and him calling Ranvijay an "animal" after being physically abusive on top of being emotionally neglectful towards him at multiple instances shows the dysfunctionality of the relationship.

The movie cuts to Ranvijay's masculinity clearly shaping up in tandem with his father's, albeit more aggressive in public and respectful as well as reactive in private owing to the friction between them. Vanga writes him into the "alpha male ideology", which gives primacy to physically strong men whose primary purpose is to fight and protect their family and women, as men allegedly did in prehistoric times. As per his direction and Ranbir's character, weak men invented poetry and art to woo women and compensate for their lack of masculinity. Ironically, he cheats on the woman he manipulates using said ideology "for strategic purposes" later in the movie.

The hypermasculine identity of Ranvijay is emblematic of the evolving idea of Hindutva masculinity as well as a more patriarchal one, wherein smoking, violence, aggression, patrilineality, and emotional restraint are idealised. As Gurkan and Serttas underlined in their paper, the foul treatment of other men, women, male friendships, authority, and so on determines the hierarchy of maleness. With reference to Ranbir's character arc too, the paper's argument that it is the depressed and insecure masculinities which tend to be shown as more aggressive can be seen as valid (Gurkan and Serttas). For instance, when Ranvijay confesses his love (for lack of a more fitting word) to Gitanjali (played by Rashmika Mandanna), he says, "You have a big pelvis. You can accommodate healthy babies," (Vanga), which reduced her role and worth to the ability to birth children. While he has been shown as a protective brother towards his sister, he forwards disrespectful remarks and behaviours to the woman he pursues, even after their marriage. Here, the problematic aspects of the filmmaker's ideation and vision also get translated, as several exchanges between them feel unnatural, uncomfortable, and offensive.

Another aspect which goes hand in hand with the marginalisation of other masculinities and misrepresentation of women is the homosocial relationships among men which exist for the purpose of mutual benefit. Homosociality denotes "social bonds among persons of the same sex" but also borders some form of desire (Sedgwick).

In *Animal,* the dialogues are heavily invested in an arguably tasteless kind of humour and unnecessary references (and often entire scenes) to male genitalia, which only the other male characters seem to enjoy. Ranvijay's incessant mentions of the same, in light of homosocial desire and the father complex, fall to the extreme when there is an entire scene dedicated to him revealing his knowledge of his father's "washroom practices" and "body hair", as if him using the word "*papa*" as punctuation throughout the running time of the movie was not evidence enough.

Given the strained relationship between Ranvijay and his father, the apparently one-sided devotion the son has towards the father for the most part of the movie is obsessive and extreme to the point that Ranvijay murders hundreds of men to "protect" his father and even points a gun at his own wife during an argument. His urge to imitate the father figure and fill in for his gaps for his sisters is a point of concern that adds further to his violent, harmful tendencies where problems can only be solved through gun violence. Interestingly, the role of the mother during Ranvijay's childhood was that of a mediator between him and Balbir, but it later shifts to an enabler of concerning behavioural patterns with clear favouritism. As much as she actively supports him, defends him and is a present parent, she is inevitably sidelined by her son, for all he can care about and pursue is his father.

Discussion

As one proceeds from one film to the next, certain commonalities connect easily – the uninterrupted access and mobility by virtue of the privileged positions of caste and class, increasing heteronormativity and fetishisation of the male body, and a slippery slope towards hypermasculine characteristics. While the role of the mother becomes incrementally unimportant, the role of the fathers becomes incrementally distant and traditional with regards to masculinities and parenting.

Furthermore, the male protagonist's behaviour towards the female leads goes from good to her being centred as a medium or catalyst for the hero's journey of finding his self-worth, to finally, toxic and violent. Ranbir Kapoor's characters, in quite an apparent manner, become increasingly representative of the idealised hegemonic masculinity of the hero figure by the society at the time, shifting from catering to the masses rather equally to predominantly appeasing the male audience. Thus, Ranbir Kapoor's career experienced a transition from the usual Hindi movie romantic hero to the action hero whose identity and masculinity are more or less dictated by sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

The nature of the conflicts with the father becomes more deep-rooted and graver with each movie, propelling greater changes in the identity of the respective male protagonists too. For instance, Prem's masculinity remained mostly unchanged and secure while Ranvijay's masculine expression heightened with rage and violence as the movie progressed. As such, the scale ranging from contemporary masculinities, which are more empathetic and gentler, to traditional or hypermasculine expressions, which are more destructive and apathetic (also what the current media understands as "toxic masculinity") (Jones), keeps tilting from the former to the latter across Ranbir's career. One common facet of these father-son conflicts, however, is that they get resolved, in a debatable sense of the term, towards the end, with the father tearfully expressing their remorse and love to their son. While it is shown as a cathartic experience in *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* and *Tamasha* (2015), the resolution becomes the undoing and a state of internal crisis for the protagonist in *Animal.*

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TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: THE UNIQUE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANS AND THEIR ADAPTATION TO DOMINANT INFLUENCES AS PORTRAYED IN ABRAHAM VERGHESE'S ACCLAIMED NOVEL *THE COVENANT OF WATER*

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Abstract:

Many speculations are prevailing regarding the origin of Syrian Christians and their use of Syriac for liturgical purposes. They are a small group of Keralites split into many smaller groups, yet they take pride in their common origin as the followers of St Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. They have adopted many of the customs and practices of the dominant culture without losing their identity and traditions. Through the story of the three generations of a Syrian Christian family in his much-acclaimed novel *The Covenant of Water*, Abraham Verghese unravels the scientific fact behind the affliction, called a condition in the novel, which had been haunting the family for generations. Moreover, the novel is a celebration of this community's unique culture, resilience, contributions, interest in art and literature, religious beliefs and adaptability. They never alienated themselves from the mainstream society, though there were clear marked differences in food habits, occupation, social customs and the like. This study employs cultural hybridity theory to analyse their unique balance of assimilation and preservation.

Keywords: Syrian Christians, culture, resilience, St Thomas, hybridity

Family sagas have long served as a lens through which cultures, traditions and histories are explored, offering insights into the resilience, uniqueness, adaptability and assimilation of communities across generations. Abraham Varghese's much acclaimed novel *The Covenant of Water* published in the year 2023 offers a vivid portrayal of the Syrian Christian community, weaving together history and the qualities of resilience and uniqueness through a multi-generational family saga. Family sagas and xenophilia have fascinated people from time immemorial. The global popularity of K-dramas, Anime and Bollywood films substantiate this. Popular literature abounds in stories where the superhuman and supernatural interact whether it is love and romance, good versus evil, resilience and survival or technology and its consequences.

The Covenant of Water is the saga of the Parambil family where a member of each generation succumbs to death by water. This they believe is the consequence of some deadly crimes committed by their ancestors and they keep it as a secret fearing exclusion from the society. Many of the customs, traditions, practices and beliefs of the Syrian Christian community and the customs and practices they have adopted from the dominant culture find expression in the novel substantiating the title of this paper. As Homi K. Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity theory states, "It is the inter-the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture." (38). This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that embraces difference without forcing a hierarchy. Cultural hybridity, therefore is not simply assimilation or rigid preservation, but a process of negotiation and translation that occurs in this 'in-between' space. Cultural groups do not entirely lose themselves to dominant cultures; rather they forge new, meaningful identities that blend elements of both assimilation and preservation. Bhabha presents hybridity as a dynamic and creative process that challenges essentialist notions of identity and cultural purity.

Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity becomes particularly relevant when examining how traditional practices and modern values intersect within specific cultural contexts. *The Covenant of Water* illustrates this hybridity in its portrayal of gender and family structures shaped by both local customs and evolving social ideals. The novel begins with the marriage of a twelve-year-old girl to a widower old enough to be her father. Though unsettling by modern standards, such marriages were not uncommon in Kerala at the time. In 1900, child marriages were prevalent across communities, but the Syrian Christian society stood apart from the region's dominant matriarchal culture, as it was deeply patriarchal. Traditionally, in cases of intestate succession, daughters received only a quarter of the inheritance allotted to sons—a system that remained in place until Mary Roy, a pioneering human rights activist and educator, successfully challenged it in the Supreme Court, paving the way for gender equality in inheritance laws.

The Covenant of Water has a well-knit plot connecting various issues and happenings, but one of the major themes that sustains the readers' curiosity is the Parambil family's affliction with water, called 'the Condition' in the novel.

A person from each generation drowning in water creates a kind of trauma among the family members, leading them to avoid water bodies as soon as they realise, they have 'the Condition.' The knowledge that there were criminals, slave owners, and murderers among the ancestors of the Parambil family accelerates the trauma.

The Christian community's obsession with the fear of punishment for sins is reflected in Vivekananda's remark, "Be not deluded by your religion teaching original sin, for the same religion teaches original purity. When Adam fell, he fell from purity. Purity is our real nature, and to regain our real nature is the object of all religions" (Baksi 225). Like the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain belief in karma, which is empowering, the Bible also teaches that one will be rewarded or punished in the afterlife according to their deeds. However, the afterlife described in the Bible is not a rebirth or reincarnation into another body on earth; rather, it is eternal life in heaven or eternal suffering in hell.

As A.K. Ramanujan mentions in his essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?", Indians believe in karma and *thalaividhi*(fate). The Bible also records that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection were predestined. The prophecies in the Old Testament and Christ's own predictions about his death and resurrection in the New Testament of *The Holy Bible* validate this,

> Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day, he will rise again. (Luke 18.31–33)

Though there are differences between the concept of generational sin in the dominant culture and the Christian idea of original sin or inherited guilt, when combined with irrational beliefs, they influence people's lives. The patriarch of the Parambil family demonstrates audacity and determination even while influenced by such fears. He does not want his children to be overprotected, as he himself had been shielded by his mother and sister. When his wife, Big Ammachi, expresses her fear of losing their son, Philipose, he firmly states, "Then let him live. Don't imprison him." (212).

This is the voice of the Syrian Christian community – one of resilience even in the midst of adversity. It reflects the strength of a community that had to fight against the forces of nature, communicable diseases, wild animals and personal losses to survive.

Many of the customs which were prevalent in the Syrian Christian community and the dominant culture, even at the beginning of the 20th century, find expression in the novel, giving more clarity to the theory used here. The main female character, Big Ammachi, is the victim of a child marriage, and her financial circumstances and the helplessness of her mother force her to marry a forty-year-old widower before she knows what marriage is. This was not something unusual in those times, and it was practised in all the communities. But unlike in the other dominant cultures of Kerala, especially among Nair communities where the matriarchal system was prevailing, in the Syrian Christian community the girls were married off.

The girls in the Syrian Christian community, once married off, did not have any rights or position in their family under the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916. This system prevailed until Mary Roy, a human rights activist and educator, moved the Supreme Court for gender equality in inheritance and similar rights to their parents' property as sons. The Syrian Christians were mainly agriculturalists, and they owned huge land holdings, and they consumed what they produced from their own land.

The core part of the Syrian Christian marriage ceremony is the bridegroom tying the *minnu*around the neck of the bride. This was adopted from the dominant culture. But unlike what is worn by the Hindu women, the Syrian Christian *minnu*has a cross on it, and Lissy, a member of the Parambil family, who had moved away from Central Travancore due to her husband's extravagance, was identified as a Syrian Christian by Dr Digby from Scotland by seeing the minnu.

Belief in the supernatural is also a recurrent theme in *The Covenant of Water*. Big Ammachi could always feel the presence of her husband's first wife's spirit in the cellar, especially after Jojo's death. The vessels falling off the shelves in the cellar confirm the presence of the supernatural. "She thinks she hears faint sobs" (178). Again, after the death of the patriarch, "she hears the sounds of digging and scratching in the courtyard just as she is about to fall asleep. It stops. The next night she hears it once more. She goes out to sit on the veranda, facing the sound. "Listen", she says, "You must forgive me" (217). Big Ammachi believes that her husband heard her, and he had always communicated through his silence. Parallels to the belief in the supernatural can be seen in the dominant culture also.

Cuisines and dressing styles evolved with the passage of time. Big Ammachi was wearing the traditional dress of the Syrian Christians for her wedding, and on occasions when she went to the church, OdathuKochamma and Anna Chedathi were all wearing the same, but later when Philipose married Elsie, she was wearing a saree.

By this time, the saree had become the common dress of the Kerala women. A few dishes which the Syrian Christians cherished were also mentioned in *The Covenant of Water*.

The state of Kerala, surrounded by lakes, lagoons, and rivers, receives plenty of rainfall and often has to endure the fury of floods. Paddy, which was once widely cultivated, and rice, the staple food of Keralites, often faced setbacks due to crop destruction caused by floods. It affected not only the lives of the wealthy landlords but also the Pulaya community, who were dependent on them for their livelihood.

In *The Covenant of Water* Shamuel has no existence without the Parambil family. The social hierarchy existing in Kerala even during the early years of the 20th century is a sub-theme of the novel. Like in the Hindu community, where this caste hierarchy was very prominent, among the Syrian Christians also, there were such discriminations. Shamuel never called his master by any other name but only 'Thampuran'. Shamuel also wanted his son to uphold such a relationship with the Parambil family. Though Big Ammachi was against any such discrimination, the question Shamuel's son asks puzzles the members of the Parambil family:

> If you think about how my *grandfather* helped your father carve out all these acres. Then consider how my father toiled here from when he was a child until the day hedied. *All his life!* And at the end of it, what does he have? Yes, many cows. And his plot for his hut—a rare thing for a *pulayan*. But just imagine if he were *not* a *pulayan*. Say he was your father's cousin. Say he worked side by side with your father. Then, after your father's time, say he continued working selflessly for Big Ammachi and for you for thirty more years. Every single day! What would be that cousin's due for his lifetime of labor? Wouldn't it be much more than what is in this passbook? It might be as much as half of all these lands (486).

Under the British rule, some of the so-called lower-caste people got converted to Christianity, but instead of mixing with the Syrian Christian community, they had churches of their own. But towards the end of the novel, there is a scene where Mariamma, the granddaughter of Big Ammachi, Shamuel's son Joppan and Anna Chedathi are sitting together in the kitchen to have food. It is an indication that in the new generation such discriminations are vanishing from society and the minds of the people.

The Syrian Christian community always stood for progress and development. Big Ammachi wanted a solution for the condition which their family had been facing. In her prayer, once the heartbroken Big Ammachi prays, "Lord, maybe You don't want to cure this for reasons I can't understand. But if you won't or can't, then send us someone who can." (79).

She believed that there would be an end to the so-called condition. Her dreams of making her son Philipose a doctor get materialised through her granddaughter Mariamma, her namesake. In the story, it is Big Ammachi who donates 150 acres of land for the construction of a hospital. All these share the community's belief in both indigenous medicine and modern medicine. Though the Syrian Christians married only within their community and were very conservative about extra-marital affairs, it comes as a surprise that Philipose knew that when Elsie came back to Parambil after a long time, she was pregnant with child. After her father's and Big Ammachi's death, only Mariamma comes to know about it from Philipose's diary. Philipose, even after knowing about it, accepted Mariamma as his own daughter and once said to her that all the Parambil property would be inherited by Mariamma.

The respect which Syrian Christians commanded is evident when Big Ammachi took her mother to the hospital in Kochi to consult Doctor Runa. He explains the seriousness of Big Ammachi's mother's condition and Babymol's problem to Big Ammachi and addresses her mother as Kochamma with so much respect.

The Syrian Christian community has been very much interested in learning and reading literature. Even in the year 1900, Big Ammachi's father, who was a priest, was interested in educating his daughter. Even when she was married off at the age of twelve, due to their circumstances, she could already read and write. Her joy knew no bounds when she got an old newspaper, and later Shamuel brought newspapers for her. Philipose was very much interested in reading novels, and when he was sent back from Madras Christian College, he brought back a radio and a good collection of books. Later, his mother, Big Ammachi, appreciates him for putting money to good use.

More historical evidence for the Syrian Christians' interest in spreading literacy among the people of Kerala can be seen in Saint Elias KuriackoseChavara's attempts to start a school alongside every church. Many social reformers have emerged from among the Syrian Christians, and St Chavara is the

most prominent among them. His starting of the printing press in the year 1846 and the publishing of many literary pieces and moral codes of conduct are proof of this.

He established the first school at Mannanam in 1846, and it was open to all sections of society, including those from the marginalised society.

Strong family bonds and sacrifice are the hallmarks of the Indian family system. The sacrifice made by the character Elsie is also an example for the love and concern of the members of the Syrian Christian family for each other. Elsie, when she learns that she has leprosy, entrusts her daughter to Big Ammachi, her mother-in-law, and disappears. Everybody assumes that she has drowned in the river. Elsie leaving her husband's home after the tragic death of their son Ninan and her relationship with Digby are forgiven by the matriarch of the Parambil family.

Many of the Syrian Christians were empathetic to the downtrodden, but they too followed the prevailing caste discrimination. When Joppan was beaten and driven away from the school, Big Ammachi tried to console Philipose and told him about the prevailing caste system and her helplessness in going against it.

> "As for us Christians, *monay*," Big Ammachi says before he asks, "we slide between these layers." Legend has it that the original families converted by Saint Thomas were Brahmins. Hindurituals remain embedded in the Christian ones, as in the tiny gold *minnu*, shaped like a tulsi leaf, that herhusband tied around her neck at her wedding, or the *Vastu* principles followed in building their houses. Christians haven't rid themselves of casteism. (223)

Conclusion

The Covenant of Water is a true portrayal of the struggles, beliefs, hardships and resilience of the Syrian Christian community in general, illustrated through the story of the Parambil family. Instead of living as a separate group, they mingle with the members of other communities and make some of the customs of the dominant culture a part of their own. They embraced the enthusiasm of the progressive initiates, whether it was by the colonisers, the other conquerors or the dominant cultures, without losing their unique cultural identity. They made a mark of their own in the areas of education and healthcare and started educational institutions and hospitals all over the country.

Today, the members of this community are all around the world, engaged in all kinds of professions. Nursing is an area where many enter, especially women, making the words of Jesus into practice: "devotion to God was meaningless unless it was expressed first of all in devotion to one's fellow-men" (Ballou 230). Even in times of uncertainty and intolerance, Christians in general remain as a peaceful group, as symbols of tolerance and peace. In spite of going through many adversities and hardships, their willpower, strong belief in God, resilience and optimism as portrayed in the novel shall be admired. This novel is a sage of the life, beliefs and customs of Syrian Christians in the backdrop of a multicultural community who differ from each other in customs and beliefs.

As Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity suggests, identity is forged in the 'in-between' spaces through negotiation, resilience, and reinvention. The novel closes with Mariamma, the daughter of Elsie and Dr Digby, finding the real reason for the family's condition. Her inspiration was Big Ammachi, who brought her up, and Philipose, who never revealed to her that he was not her father. She too has the spirit to fight, to fight against injustices and superstitions. At the end, when all the secrets about the parentage were revealed and the mystery behind the family was unravelled, Mariamma too shows the strength and resilience of her parents, and she too becomes the custodian of a family secret.

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MONSTROUS BODIES AND CULTURAL CURRENTS: DISABILITY, HORROR, AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

Rather than discussing disability merely as a theme in horror cinema, this paper examines its multiple functions as a narrative device in shaping audience perceptions of fear and otherness. It explores how disability has been used as both an aesthetic and thematic tool in horror films and the extent to which its representation has been socially constructed—drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "Construction"—in response to larger cultural anxieties and social biases.

Horror cinema frequently portrays disabled characters as either grotesque villains (Friday the 13th, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre) or tragic yet resilient heroes (Hush, A Quiet Place), reinforcing ableist tropes while simultaneously offering a space for their subversion. Disability is often depicted as both a source of fear and a paradoxical form of power, shaping audience responses in ways that reflect deeper societal tensions surrounding normalcy and difference.

Ultimately, this research calls for the integration of disabled voices in creative industries and advocates for horror's potential as a site of subversion and resistance against dominant narratives of ability and normalcy. By bridging film studies, disability studies through Crip theory, and popular culture theory, this paper underscores the importance of representation in shaping cultural currents and public discourse, urging filmmakers and audiences to rethink the horror genre's role in constructing collective fears and social attitudes toward disability.

Keywords: Disability, Horror Cinema, Narrative Device, Cultural Anxieties, Foucault, filmstudies

Introduction

What if the real horror on screen is not a masked killer or a supernatural beast but the ugly reflection of the deep-seated prejudices we have? Imagine at the theatre in a darkened room, watching the creature on screen, and it is not the monster lurking in the corner but a body that does not fall in line with the so-called societal norm. Horror films have long exploited these differences for decades, using disability as shorthand for monstrosity and sometimes pity for cultural narratives that equate divergence with danger (Hayes and Black 45).

Classics of early horror feature disabled individuals in a victim-villain dichotomy that actually symbolises the societal discomfort with difference. The problematising issue raises a pertinent question: Are we really scared of the unknown, or are we only observing our internalised ableism reflected on screen? As audiences, we cannot escape confronting the monsters created in fiction but the realities behind the concept of some bodies being dubbed "other".

This is where Crip Theory complicates the discourse. Robert McRuer (2006) implies that disability is not a sign of weakness or aberration; it can also be recoiled as a powerful cultural form of resistance and identity. Such acceptance of the prevailing able-bodied norm gives Crip Theory a new vision of understanding the disabled bodies as sites of resilience and difference, not as objects of pity or objects of revulsion. Wasn't it what horror cinema said: instead of reinforcing the trope of the "monstrous" disabled villain or the pitiable disabled victim, maybe it should use these stories to subvert and question the very idea of normalcy?

Think about Friday the 13th, for example, or The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, which has always had images of bodily or cognitive difference for the fearful: such images, though certainly effective in terms of having real raw thrills, also seem to reinforce stereotypes that stigmatise the disabled community (Smith 3-6). Nonetheless, the most recent academic debates suggest that horror, in fact, can create a commonplace transformation not only reflective of cultural anxieties but also critique them. For example, Towlson (2014) notes that, in truth, even disability pictured in some degree of sympathy is framed within the narrative of pity accounts that takes away the campaign of persons with disabilities.

In this exploration, I ask: How do horror films, through their visual and narrative strategies, add to the cultural construction of disability-as-monster, and what are some early and effective representations of that history? What might it be like, then, for that genre to transform those representations into narratives that challenge our assumptions about ability, beauty, and humanity? Crip Theory is, through this study, expected to deconstruct conventional tropes of horror cinema and start producing new frameworks for inclusive storytelling - frameworks that cannot merely see disability metaphorically in fear but as the source of dynamic and rich identity and resistance (Hall 5-6).

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology by bringing together film analysis with critical discourse analysis in order to understand the ways in which disability is represented in horror films, as seen through the lens of Crip Theory.

This research initiates itself by gathering a plethora of horror 'classical' films—like *Hush*, *A Quiet Place*, *Bird Box*, and *Don't Breathe*—all of which feature disablism prominently. The films drawn to this study received a critical reception and also became hot topics in contemporary disability discourse. The analysis, using as its main framework the Crip Theory, points to how these films have now become agents of both contesting and perpetuating normative ableist narratives by recasting disablism as empowering and resilient as opposed to being a deficiency. The films in question undergo a detailed analysis of visual and narrative components to expose the very subtle ways in which they engage otherness as a survival tactic. This also involves a comparative study that puts together quite a number of what is common and dissimilar across the selections in the films, thus exposing how different narrative strategies may lead to strengthening or subverting societal stereotypes about disability. The ideas coming from the film analyses will be integrated with the thematic strands from existing academic literature retrieved from a scholarly database concerning the development of the comprehensive interpretation of how horror could transform cultural notions of disability.

Literature Review

Horror movies, as a rule, tap into the mystifications of societies regarding physical and mental differences. Cinema classics such as *Friday the 13th* match the terrifying images of disfigurement or cognitive variance invoked with a clear predisposition towards *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* at best. Scholars contend that this representation is not only a narrative device but also integrated into a wider cultural discourse associating difference from the norm with danger (Hayes and Black 45). Portrayed as both monstrous aberrations and tragic creatures, doomed to suffer, that binary relationship reinforces disability stigma and underpins a deserving pity-exclusion discourse among the critical elements in most early films. In fact, one cannot fully appreciate how horror has reflected and reinforced popular ableist attitudes over the years without considering the historical context.

Horror as a "Forceful Instrument of Socialization" in Popular Narratives

It is not only a mirror but also a subtle social regulation tool (Weber 2-4) in that horror occupies an entirely diverse and multifaceted space in American culture, reflecting as much of our hopes and fears as it hides behind its covert influence. Understanding this covert way in which horror manifests its power is crucial since there is usually no direct instruction through which learning or conditioning happens. It should be understood that the majority of the socialisation process in which one internalises norms, values, and behaviours takes place in a less obvious manner. The hidden curriculum refers, thus, to how, without realising it, individuals, through Marxian educational theory, incorporated societal expectations into their own lives (Giroux and Penna 45; Anyon 78; Wren 102; Kentli 56). For instance, initial education studies provide evidence that lethargies, while imparting literacy and numeracy, instil in students the capabilities to sit quietly, ask for permission for simple acts and obey classroom authority; therefore, we argue through similar, usually unnoticed ways that take place when interacting in visual media.

However extreme or absurd horror offers, it still operates within some contexts that could be consistent with what we already know to consider as "true". Hence, horror narratives usually lean heavily on stereotypes to quickly establish character backstories. As audiences, we tend to accept familiar narrative structures while rejecting the alien ones (Schweinitz 45; Sherman and Frost 78–80). An example would be that audiences find it acceptable to suppose the existence of a creepy janitor with knife-like hands because that type has already been constructed by enduring stereotypes of the janitor as poor, demented, or predatory, while rejecting the one that a character such as Jason could venture into space; that much contradicts our conventions. In this sense, horror consumption is not merely an amusement but is also the top among social norms as well as continuing stereotypical representations.

Crip Theory and Its Application in Film Studies

As articulated by Robert McRuer (2006), Crip Theory resists the "normal" models of seeing disability. Rather than seeing disability strictly as a personal loss or tragedy, Crip Theory recuperates disability as a powerful site of cultural difference and resistance. Disability can subvert normative definitions of beauty, ability, and worth of humans; thus, it invites a reconsideration of all cultural narrative theories, according to McRuer. This theoretical tool has shaped the discourse on horror films by asking the central questions of why certain bodies get marked as "other" and how these marks figure in different layers of social hierarchy (McRuer 120).

Further, Crip Theory directs attention from disability proper, instead focusing on power and representation, allowing potent means of the deconstruction of popular stereotypes in horror cinema.

Devising Rethinking Representations of Disability in Horror Cinema

Recent scholarship has interrogated the dichotomous representations of disability in contemporary horror films more intensely. Angela Smith's Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and the Classic Horror Cinema critiques the way history has been taken to conflate disability and monstrosity. For her, many of the horror films have, in fact, retained fictional pseudo-scientific narratives that equate disability with either a genetic flaw or deviation from a 'pure' human form. This not only dehumanises the character but also legitimises pernicious, commensurate social attitudes because such differences are understood to be basically odious.

For (Hayes and Black 45), Hollywood generally constructs out of a pity discourse on disability, and they argue that such representations would contribute to the making of a disability, dependent and under some kind of social and physical constraining. Such are just some of the concerns examined in their works regarding how such cinematic tropes create a culture in which, ultimately, disability is something to be feared and pitied and, thus, leaves little space for empowering narratives.

Travis Sutton (2014) extends and deepens such critiques by taking the view of how horror films avenge the body from disgust or stir hope at incredible odds by objectifying disabled characters. Thus, according to Sutton, even while attempting to create sympathetic portrayals in new movies, such attempts find themselves unsuccessful because of operation under already prescribed tropes. The same binary representation tendency, where the disability in its representation is either a curse to be cured or a burden to be pitied, warrants radical rethinking of narrative strategies within the genre.

Alternative Narratives and Inclusive Storytelling

Countering such entrenched narratives, scholars have come up with alternative frameworks to see disability in horror. Perhaps a useful approach would be to relook into disability as a form of embodied difference rather than a source of horror, a difference that could subvert the normal. By applying Crip Theory to film analysis, the researchers argue for reimagining horror films that foreground lived experience and agency through the stories of disabled characters rather than seeing them simply as symbols of otherness (McRuer 23; Hall 58–60)

Some contemporary filmmakers are now experimenting with storytelling that really cools the old-style "cure" tropes. Now, you get films with disabled characters embracing their differences and using vantage points to walk in and even break walls that surround hostile spaces. Doing that provides a counter-narrative to disability being painted, in recent history, as comprising loss, decay, or degeneration. This change is significant in the sense that it opens up new potential for the horror genre to critique societal standards and to foster empathy rather than simply instil fear. Such alternative narratives also call for greater involvement of disabled voices in the creative process, a move that promises to enhance authenticity and promote genuine representation (Sutton 56).

In addition, such repositioning of disability in horror accords with broad cultural movements for social justice and inclusion. In fact, the demand for more authentic representation has found resonance in other scholarly studies that criticise "cripping-up" – casting non-disabled actors to portray disabled characters – feeding further marginalisation of disabled individuals by not allowing them to portray the roles rooted in their very own experiences (Kataja 20–23). Instead, then, by centring narratives on disabled characters played by disabled actors, the genre can start to dismantle the age-old structures of ableism that have shaped its history.

As filmmakers begin to embrace these alternative narratives and incorporate disabled voices into the creative process, horror cinema can evolve from a repository of fear to a platform for empathy and social critique. In doing so, it holds the promise of transforming not only the genre itself but also the broader cultural discourse on disability—a discourse that, when reimagined, celebrates difference as an integral part of the human condition (Hayes and Black 45–47; McRuer 89; Smith 101–03; Sutton 56)

Ultimately, by engaging with and expanding upon the insights provided by scholars across disciplines, this literature review underscores the urgent need for a reconfigured horror narrative—one that is inclusive, dynamic, and deeply reflective of the diverse experiences of disability in our society.

Results and Discussion

Flanagan's *Hush*, Krasinski's *A Quiet Place*, and Leonetti's *The Silence* all share a striking commonality: their deaf characters often turn what many see as a limitation into an advantage. In these films, deafness is not merely a challenge but a tool that enables survival in life-threatening situations, thereby questioning conventional ableist assumptions and the traditional medical view of disability.

Rather than viewing deafness solely as a deficit, these movies illustrate how a disability can reshape one's environment into a space of empowerment—a reflection of the social model of disability.

For instance, in *Hush* (2016), the protagonist Maddie—a deaf author living in isolation—became deaf after an unspecified childhood illness. Her solitary life in the woods is both a consequence of societal exclusion and a deliberate choice, as she asserts, "Isolation happened to me. I didn't choose it." This statement resonates on two levels: it recalls her medical history and hints at personal experiences, such as a recent breakup, that pushed her to withdraw from urban life.

In doing so, the film underscores how societal ableism has already symbolically isolated her, prompting Maddie to create a physical space that caters to her unique needs.

Unlike traditional horror survivors—often depicted in slasher films as virtuous women overcoming a male threat—Maddie's struggle is centred on her deafness. Her primary challenge is not battling a malevolent force in a conventional sense but outsmarting a killer who relies on sound. When trapped, she internally muses, "He is coming in here… Once he is in this house, it is over… He's got the advantage.

He can hear you." This internal dialogue highlights that her disability, typically considered a disadvantage, becomes a critical factor in the threat she faces. The killer's fixation on Maddie, his intent to make her his first deaf victim, further accentuates this irony. He taunts her by saying, "I bet I can make you scream," mocking her preference for sign language over speech.

Ironically, while both Maddie and her assailant view her deafness as a weakness, the film demonstrates the contrary: Maddie's home is equipped with modifications—such as alternative alarms—that actually enhance her safety, effectively turning her disability into an asset that the killer cannot counter.

Maddie's experience is further contrasted with other characters in the film. Sarah, Maddie's neighbour and friend, falls victim to the killer after failing to adapt her behaviour; her instinct to call out loudly, a mode of communication that works for hearing individuals, ultimately leads to her death. Similarly, John, Sarah's boyfriend, becomes distracted by the noise and is fatally stabbed, his auditory reliance proving to be a fatal vulnerability. In these cases, the characters' dependency on sound highlights how traditional social conditioning can become a liability in a context where silence is a strategic advantage.

In the final confrontation, Maddie turns the tables on her attacker. She employs various noise-making tactics—using her car alarm, throwing objects, and triggering modified fire alarms—to distract and disable him. Ultimately, she uses a corkscrew as a weapon in a desperate struggle that epitomises the reversal of power: her environment, designed around her deafness, disables the killer while enabling her to fight back. This dramatic reversal is a potent illustration of the social model of disability, where the focus shifts from an individual's impairment to how the environment can be adapted to support different needs.

Moreover, Maddie's survival is not solely attributed to her physical actions. Her "writer brain"—a term coined by her mother—reflects her innate ability to process, imagine, and plan various outcomes in the face of danger. This cognitive skill, honed from a young age through her unique experiences as a deaf person, becomes a crucial survival tool. It allows her to simulate different strategies internally before deciding to fight back, embodying what disability scholar Sami Schalk describes as the supercrip trope: overcoming challenges through a unique ability born out of disability (Ramalho 140). Here, Maddie's "writer brain" not only compensates for her lack of hearing but also becomes the very mechanism through which she turns her supposed weakness into a strength.

In summary, these films challenge the prevailing notion that disability is inherently disadvantageous. Instead, they reveal a complex interplay where deafness not only shapes personal identity but also redefines survival strategies in extreme circumstances. By reconfiguring her environment and leveraging her unique cognitive strengths, Maddie exemplifies how a disability can foster resilience and adaptability—offering a refreshing critique of conventional ableist narratives in horror cinema.

Deafness as an Unexpected Strength in Apocalyptic Horror Narratives

Another notable portrayal of a deaf protagonist is found in John Krasinski's 2018 film *A Quiet Place*. In this post-apocalyptic setting, the world is overrun by creatures that, despite their blindness, possess highly developed hearing. Regan, a deaf teenager, and her family have managed to survive for over a year primarily because their reliance on sign language turns what is typically seen as a disability into an essential means of communication.

Regan's Struggle Against Stereotypes

Unlike Maddie from *Hush*, Regan does not fit the conventional "supercrip" mould. Instead, her family—especially her father, Lee—views her deafness as a burden, a perspective rooted in a past accident that still influences his behaviour. Early in the film, while the family is scavenging, one of the younger sons discovers a toy rocket he desires. Lee intervenes by approaching the boy cautiously, removing the toy's batteries, and signing a warning about loud noises. Later, Regan secretly returns the toy to her brother, signalling him to keep it quiet. However, he inadvertently reinstalls the batteries, causing the toy to emit loud sounds that attract a creature, which ultimately leads to his tragic death.

Parental Control and the Medical Model

This incident deepens the rift between Regan and Lee. Although Lee verbally downplays his blame, his actions—such as preventing Regan from entering the basement—reveal an underlying desire to "fix" her deafness. When Regan asks why she's barred from the basement, Lee responds evasively with, "You know why," and proceeds to offer his latest version of homemade hearing aids.

Regan's curt rejection— "It. Won't. Work."—underscores her frustration with being treated as if she were broken. This approach mirrors the medical model of disability, which views deafness as an abnormality in need of correction (Schmid 466).

In another scene, as Lee prepares to scavenge with Regan's younger brother, Marcus, he insists that Regan remain behind for her own "safety". This decision highlights the contradiction in his approach: if Regan's deafness were truly dangerous, teaching her survival skills would be more effective than sheltering her away. Lee's inconsistent behaviour further reinforces his reliance on a medical perspective that sees her deafness solely as a deficit.

Reversing the Narrative of Vulnerability in Popular Currents

Throughout the film, multiple incidents suggest that Regan's deafness, rather than being a liability, can serve as a strategic advantage. During a family game of Monopoly, Regan accidentally knocks over a lantern, creating a cacophony that draws hostile creatures near the farmhouse. Although this mishap echoes earlier events—such as the toy rocket incident—it also demonstrates that Regan is acutely aware of the risks associated with noise, regardless of her ability to hear.

Over time, Regan's experience begins to subvert her father's expectations. While Lee's hearing aids were intended as a remedy for her deafness, they ultimately reveal their true value when Regan discovers that the devices produce a feedback effect that repels the creatures. This revelation turns the hearing aids into an unexpected weapon, symbolising how her deafness can empower her rather than hinder her. Lee's persistent belief in curing her becomes increasingly misguided, and his overprotectiveness eventually contributes to his own downfall.

Ally's Leadership in 'The Silence'

A similar exploration of deafness as an asset is presented in John R. Leonetti's *The Silence*. Here, Ally, a deaf teenager, leads her family through a world where blind, sound-sensitive creature's roam. Unlike Regan, Ally is portrayed as the competent and natural leader of her family. Her ability to navigate a perilous environment without making inadvertent noise sets her apart; she never falls into the trap of accidentally endangering her loved ones through her deafness. Instead, everyday tasks such as reading news on her tablet are elevated to the status of extraordinary skills, reinforcing the notion of the supercrip. Moreover, the film offers a dramatic backstory of her loss of hearing, drawing parallels with origin narratives found in superhero tales.

Challenging Conventional Attitudes in Popular Horror Narratives

Both *A Quiet Place* and *The Silence* underscore a critical shift in how deaf characters are portrayed in contemporary horror. While Regan is initially seen as a liability, the films gradually reposition her deafness as a vital strength—one that allows her to combat threats in ways that hearing characters cannot. These narratives challenge prevailing ableist attitudes and question the dominant medical model that reduces deafness to a problem in need of a cure. Instead, they suggest that the environment can be adapted to empower those with disabilities, thereby reframing deafness as a source of resilience and strategic advantage.

In essence, these films advocate a more nuanced understanding of disability, one that recognises the potential of deafness to serve as both a unique identifier and a tactical benefit. By turning a supposed weakness into a life-saving strength, the narratives of Regan and Ally ultimately call for a reevaluation of conventional views on disability in horror cinema.

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SPREAD OF KOREAN WEBTOONS

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Abstract

Social media are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Kietzmann et al.). It can bring like-minded people and people with shared interests together to form communities. This is very clearly seen in a number of fields, ranging from literature and arts and culture to science and technology. This is true for communities of Manga, Anime, comic books and webtoons as well. The followers and enthusiasts of various such comics come together to hold discussions on topics pertaining to their favourite comics, creating a fandom which is very active, where its members are in constant and regular communication and interactions with each other. This would have been very difficult or rare in the absence of social media as a communication tool. This paper seeks to analyse how fans of various South Korean webtoons have come together to form communities on social media and how or whether it has contributed to the spread and popularisation of the South Korean webtoons or if it's the popularity of webtoons themselves as a result of apps like Line Webtoon that have resulted in people coming together on social media to form communities. The paper will also analyse how diverse the fandom is in different ways. The paper also seeks to analyse how much these fandom communities have in common with each other and how they came together, whether this is a very general phenomenon or whether webtoon fandoms have their own peculiarities.

Keywords: - social media, communities, fandom, webtoons, Line Webtoon, communication, animanga

Webtoons (Korean: 웹툰), refer to a variety of online, digital comics which came into existence in South Korea, which are designed to be read on smartphones for the most part. Webtoons were quite obscure in countries other than South Korea when they first appeared. However, their popularity had increased rapidly due to ease of access online and the variety of free online comic content (Harper). It is a rapidly growing medium that has surpassed print comics in volume, numbers and popularity.

Webtoons normally have some shared characteristics. Each episode of a webtoon is usually published as one lengthy, vertical strip, making it more suitable for reading on digital devices such as smartphones and laptops and desktop computers. Some of them make use of music and animations that play during chapters, and unlike earlier and typical manga or manhwa, they are coloured most of the time and not in black and white since they are published online instead of using paper, like in a comic book or a magazine.

As of July 2014, Naver had published 520 webtoons, while Daum had published 434 (Commander). Various online services of webtoons had begun to officially translate many of their webtoons into English since the beginning of the 2010s, and some South Korean publishers like Lezhin, Toptoon and Toomics began to translate their works by themselves.

Social media are forms of digital communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (social media and the Internet). They have some common features (social media and the Internet). Social media are interactive applications based on the internet. User-generated content—such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, and data generated through all online interactions (What Is social media? | Society $SOCIETY)—is the lifeblood of social media. Users create profiles for the various apps that were designed, created, and maintained by their respective companies. Social media connects individuals to wider networks, individuals and groups, which leads to the development of online social groups.

Additionally, social media are used to document past events and memories, learn and explore things, advertise oneself, and form friendships, along with the growth of ideas from the creation of blogs, podcasts, videos, and gaming sites (Nandi et al.).

These attributes of social media help the fandoms of webtoons and Animanga spread knowledge of their respective series. The ability to share to the wider community and like-minded people is a massive advantage of social media. Social media has allowed for mass cultural exchange and intercultural communication. This includes communication on one's favourite webtoons. This ability to communicate easily with others who are likely continents apart is what makes social media so potent in creating fandoms that come together. A person does not even have to meet the other fans in real life.

Webtoon (stylised in all caps) is an online platform for comics published online, also known as webtoons, from Korea, launched by Naver Corporation in 2004. It provides publishing as well as hosting for various webtoons and other compact digital comics.

The platform was first launched in South Korea and was called Naver Webtoon. Later, the international version was called Line Webtoon when it was launched in July 2014, as the Naver brand was not well known outside South Korea and some of its services were not available internationally. In 2019, Line Webtoon was renamed as Webtoon in English.

The phenomenon of the spread of webtoons throughout the globe has much to do with the phenomenon that can be described as Transcreation. The process of translating webtoons or manga/manhwa, etc., from their original language to another language is called scanlation. Scanlation is the amateur-run industry of scanning, translating, and editing manga from one language to another (Bluething). The term was originally used primarily for comics of Japanese origin but has since diversified.

Scanlations can be viewed on the internet in different manga sites, often aggregator sites, but also other websites. This process of translating a webtoon from one language to another can thus be seen as a type of creative work. Essentially, translating a webtoon or a manga from one language to another leads to the recreation of that work in a different language, hence the term transcreation.

Transcreation, short for "translation + creation", is a creative translation process that goes beyond straightforward linguistic conversion of text from one language to another (Manager). Unlike traditional translation, where the primary goal is to convey the original meaning accurately, transcreation focuses on capturing the essence, tone, and cultural nuances of the source content (Manager) while adapting it to suit the target audience's language, culture, and context (Manager).

The community of fans, united by their love of a particular work, is called a fandom. The creation of a fandom is absolutely vital for the spread of a webtoon's fame. Psychological ownership of webtoons by fans leads to webtoon fandom. The fandom created through the process of transcreation then further spreads the fame of the work among others, attracting new fans and enlarging the fandom. The fandom of various webtoons interact on the internet, through various online social media apps like Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Discord, etc. These social media sites, apps and forums serve as an avenue for the different types of fans of Webtoons to interact. There are a variety of webtoons with dedicated social media groups and pages dedicated to them on the internet, both big and small. These include Facebook groups and subreddits. Much of the same is true for fans of animanga. What sets webtoons apart from animanga, however, is their ease of access, facilitated by webtoon apps, which are basically free in many cases to read.

Webtoons really took off outside Korea with the launch of the Line Webtoon app in 2014. This made webtoons easily available on the internet.

Webtoons are extremely popular, and their popularity is caused to an extent by their ease of access due to platforming. Korean webtoons are easily available on the internet due to them being available on easily accessible platforms, namely the webtoon apps. Korean webtoon platforms demonstrate the continuing and intensifying dependency of art on platforms—a process that can be called "the platformisation of culture"—and that this specific type of platformisation is reinforced by what can be called "the artist incubating system". The case of webtoon platforms reveals a number of telling aspects of media ecosystems for art production in the digital age—aspects that are spreading and expanding to various fields of art. These platforms are also connected on social media. Social media increases the visibility of these platforms, further boosting audience engagement. This in turn contributes to the gathering of more fans, enlarging the fandom and making the work more popular. This is noticeable for many webtoons, including Kubera, Unordinary, Lookism, etc.

The primary way of growth for many webtoons is through fan recommendations to others. Thus, the fame of a work spreads through good word of mouth and positive reviews by others. Although webtoon apps do sometimes promote the webtoons within them through advertisement and events, this is not done for a majority of webtoons, and in many cases, it is not sufficient for those webtoons advertised or promoted. There are a good chunk of webtoons that received a boost in viewership and popularity due to promotion by apps like Line Webtoon, but looking at webtoons like Tower of God, God of Highschool, Solo Leveling, etc., this can be seen as a minor factor in popularising webtoons, as these webtoons became popular with little promotion. Also, it can be seen that many of the webtoons advertised were already popular. There is evidence, however, that promotions of some webtoons did give them a boost in popularity they might otherwise not have had. But evidence available suggests that social media communities created by fans are far more effective at spreading the word about webtoons and their fandoms.

There are a number of factors that affect the popularity of a webtoon. This includes the art style or quality of a webtoon, the complexity of its story, the type or genre of the webtoon, etc. Shoddy translation by the official translations, for example, at the Line Webtoon app (which is quite common) can lead to people being put off.

For example, the webtoon Kubera has extremely poor official translations. The art at the beginning of Kubera is not very refined, and its plot is quite complicated. These factors have led to it being not quite popular.

Originally, Kubera was being translated by the fans before Line Webtoon put a stop to it and took over, starting the official translations. The fan translations had built up a sizable fanbase for the webtoon. However, due to Line Webtoon putting a stop to the fan translations, no new chapters were translated until the official release caught up almost two years later. Due to this, much of the older fanbase had dispersed, not willing to wait for the translations to start again. Interest in the webtoon almost died out, except in a few ardent fans. The serialisation of Kubera in Line Webtoon didn't bring many fans due to the poor quality of translation. Later, the fans began to translate again, due to the shoddy nature of official translations.

In such hostile circumstances, the support and dedication of a fandom is what will make a series better known. Later, gradually, thanks to the dedication of the fandom, Kubera began to spark more interest among the wider webtoon and animanga community due to positive word of mouth, bringing new fans. Thus, the dedication of fans and their ability to communicate with themselves and others outside the fandom is of the utmost importance when it comes to making sure that a series is well known, if not popular. This is where the importance of social media comes in. Social media allows this type of seamless communication that allows various fandoms to connect with members within the same fandom and members of other fandoms. This allows people to spread the word and recommend their favourite webtoons to others, spreading awareness and interest.

Other factors for the popularity of a webtoon can include personal preferences. Certain webtoons are easier to digest for more people than others.

Webtoon fandoms are very similar to animanga fandoms on social media. In both types of fandoms, people come from very diverse backgrounds. People in these fandoms come from different countries, ethnicities, races, ages and genders. Social media erases such boundaries in connecting people sharing common interests and what people are able to do. Webtoons have a global viewership and fanbase, similar to animanga. Anyone with a smartphone can open the webtoon apps and read them. The fandom of anime and manga generally are active in social media which includes Facebook, reddit, twitter and Discord. The ability to bond over social media provided by social is an immense boon for both animanga fans and webtoon fans. People can interact with strangers and form bonds with them over shared, common interests. This is very easy. There are also opportunities to argue and debate, providing information, etc. The large Manga, Anime and Manhwa communities in places like Reddit with its subreddits and the various communities of Facebook and the many animanga and webtoon enthusiasts of Twitter is evidence for this.

Elitism is the idea of looking down on something as inferior. Generally speaking, elitism in a large number of animanga fans is a phenomenon that prevents them from looking favourably at webtoons. Animanga fans tend to look down on webtoons, not entirely without reason. As webtoon apps are apps that allow free publishing by independent authors, there is a lack of quality control in the form of editors, etc that characterise Japanese Manga and traditional print Manhwa in Korea, or print comics in general. Therefore, much of the webtoons published in apps like Line Webtoon are mediocre. But some of the more recognized works among webtoons, especially Korean are looked at in a more favourable light.

The fandoms themselves however, are very similar as to say that there are no real defining characteristics that can separate webtoon fandoms from animanga fandoms, except some minor characteristics. The interactions on social media, etc of animanga and webtoon fandoms are not dissimilar to one another. These fandoms also cannot be truly separated from one another as many webtoon fans are animanga fans as well and vice versa. Both traditional print Manga/Manhwa and webtoons are graphic mediums. Other than the top to bottom format and colour of webtoons and their easier access due to apps, there is little to separate and distinguish between the two.

It is truly the advent of social media that has propelled webtoons into the limelight and given them recognition. It has made finding new webtoons easier and allows the creators of these webtoons to reach a wider audience. This gains them recognition. Furthermore, other fans of the same work can be met in the internet, there's no need to meet them in real life. Meeting fellow fans in real life would have been extremely rare. The use of forums and social media in promoting content cannot be underestimated. Accessing and sharing webtoons have become much easier.

The existence of social media has essentially been a boon to fandoms of comics, animanga, webtoons, tv series, etc. The usefulness of these websites in helping connect people of shared interests cannot be understated.

Ultimately, both the fans of various South Korean webtoons coming together to form communities on social media and the existence of apps like Line Webtoon, have contributed to the popularity and spread of webtoons. These two factors complement each other. However, the factor of fans coming together to form communities on social media have had a greater impact on the spread and popularization of webtoons than the webtoon apps themselves.

While such apps are popular and provide easy accessibility, much of the popularity of webtoons themselves are due to the fans and fandoms interacting with each other online, mostly on social media. It is not the apps making the webtoons popular leading to fans gathering in communities in social media. Rather, it is mostly the fans gathering in social media and forming communities that helps spread the word and makes webtoons more popular. The apps are a gateway. What webtoon apps do provide however, are platforms for the writers and artists of these digital comics. This is significant as it pretty much gives them a free reign on how and what they want to draw and write. This also negates the need to have the work be scrutinized before publication, by an editor. This does contribute to making webtoons more popular.

The various communities of webtoons on the internet are similar to each other, with the differences being minimal. They are also similar to animanga communities, with peculiarities being minimal. At the end of the day, the proliferation of social media is what made webtoons become as popular as they have. This fact is irrefutable.

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LADAKH IN FLUX: NEGOTIATING TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract

Globalization has drastically altered Ladakh, a region historically defined by its geographical isolation and deeply ingrained indigenous traditions, into a vibrant locus of cultural amalgamation, where local heritage interacts with global influences. While cultural exchange has facilitated greater connectivity, expanded educational opportunities, and economic diversification, it has simultaneously precipitated the erosion of traditional practices, linguistic legacy, and ecological knowledge systems. This paper critically examines the interplay between local and global forces in Ladakh, analyzing how folk traditions, cuisine, architectural styles, and socio-cultural practices have evolved in response to external influences. The increasing presence of tourism, mass media, and consumerist culture has introduced new aspirations, hybridized identities, and shifting economic paradigms, positioning Ladakh as a space of both cultural resilience and vulnerability. Traditional folk songs and oral narratives, once central to communal identity and ecological consciousness, now coexist alongside contemporary artistic expressions, illustrating an ongoing negotiation between the preservation of cultural heritage and the embrace of modernity. Furthermore, this paper explores how globalization has reconfigured sustainability practices, as Ladakh transitions from historically self-sufficient agrarian economies to a market-oriented system that is increasingly dependent on external resources. By critically assessing both the opportunities and challenges posed by globalization, this study contends that cultural exchange in Ladakh is not a process of mere assimilation but a complex dialectical negotiation wherein local traditions adapt, resist, and reconfigure themselves within a globalized framework. The study underscores the urgency of implementing balanced cultural policies and sustainable tourism models that safeguard Ladakh's unique identity, while simultaneously fostering meaningful engagement with global influences in ways that guarantee cultural continuity and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Globalization, Ladakh, Sustainability, Self-sufficient, Agrarian.

Introduction

Ladakh is a trans-Himalayan cold desert at a high elevation that has long been characterized by its geographical seclusion, indigenous customs, and environmentally sustainable practices. Ladakh was not entirely isolated even before India's independence. Historically, it served as a vital link on the Silk Route, facilitating trade between Central Asian countries and Tibet. However, it was only in the 1950s that extensive road construction projects were undertaken to establish stronger connectivity between Ladakh and other parts of the country. Traditionally, Ladakh's socioeconomic structures were intricately intertwined with its delicate ecosystem nurturing a lifestyle grounded in self-reliance and ecological consciousness. The region's customary traditions including subsistence farming, pastoralism, labor-sharing, and water-sharing systems were meticulously adapted to its challenging climatic conditions thereby sustaining ecological equilibrium and safeguarding resources throughout millennia. However, in the last few decades, the spread of globalization, the influx of tourists, and economic shifts have adversely altered Ladakh's cultural and environmental landscapes, raising concerns over long-term sustainability, cultural erosion, and ecological degradation. Globalization has brought about transformative economic potentials, advanced infrastructure, and optimized communication channels, bridging Ladakh to domestic and international commerce. While this has contributed to improved livelihoods and educational possibilities, it has also led to considerable ecological disruptions. The influx of tourism heightened demand for commercial commodities, and the adoption of market-oriented economic systems have exerted excessive pressure on Ladakh's natural resources, including its water supply, farmlands, and biodiversity. Moreover, the proliferation of concrete-centric urbanization, disposable trash, and carbon-emitting industries has hampered Ladakh's centuries-old ecological knowledge systems, substituting healthy indigenous practices with ecologically detrimental alternatives. Lundup claims that "By bringing money into Ladakh, tourism is seen to foster greed and materialism." (Culture, Commodification 4). The socio-cultural aspects of globalization have also transformed Ladakh's identity, as traditional folk songs, oral narratives, and rituals have been extensively commercialized for tourist consumption or displaced by modern influences. Lundup gives an example stating that "For example during the festival of Hemis monastery, tourists who pay money are given priority, and local pilgrims often do not have any significance.

Sometimes monks also show tourists, paying an additional fee, particularly rare or beautiful thangkas, statues, or ritual objects" (Culture, Commodification 7). The decline of these traditional customs signals a wider marginalization of conventional wisdom, which has historically been an integral part of Ladakh's ecological stewardship. Women, who have traditionally played a crucial role in environmental safeguarding through seed preservation, water management, and storytelling, are notably affected, as their contributions are often disregarded in contemporary advancement policies.

This study situates Ladakh's change within the larger discourse regarding environmental sustainability and cultural resilience stressing the dire need for policies incorporating indigenous knowledge with contemporary conservation approaches to guarantee a balanced and environmentally viable future. This research advocates for a development model that values local traditions as essential to sustainability rather than as obstacles to modernization. It employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from deep ecology, and postcolonial environmentalism.

Theoretical Framework: Deep Ecology and Postcolonial Environmentalism

This study employs theoretical perspectives from deep ecology and postcolonial environmentalism. Arne Naess's deep ecology framework highlights the interconnectedness of every species within a dynamic network of intrinsic relationships, where things are not separated but fundamentally marked by connections. An intrinsic relation denotes that the very existence and identity of two entities are mutually dependent. The complete field paradigm challenges dualistic notions, such as the "main-in-environment" framework, by dismissing the idea of isolated, self-sufficient entities. It asserts that all entities live within a network of interdependencies, and any notion of separateness is only a simplified abstraction rather than a true portrayal of ecological reality. (Naess 28). Ladakh's indigenous ecological practices align with this philosophy, as local inhabitants have historically considered their environment as a manifestation of their cultural and spiritual identity rather than as a resource to be exploited. Helena shares her experience in her book "Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh" that "I was beginning to learn how Ladakhis manage to survive in such a difficult environment. I was also beginning to learn the meaning of the word frugality. In the West, frugality conjures up images of old aunts and padlocked pantries. But the frugality you find in Ladakh, which is fundamental to the people's prosperity, is quite different. Using limited resources in a careful way has nothing to do with miserliness; this is frugality in its original meaning of "fruitfulness": getting more out of little. Where we would consider something completely worn out, exhausted of all possible worth, and would throw it away, Ladakhis will find some further use for it. Nothing whatever is just discarded. What cannot be eaten can be fed to the animals; what cannot be used as fuel can fertilize the land" (24-25). Ahluwalia mentioned that 64 percent of travelers primarily visit to get acquainted with Tibetan religion and witness its culture. Buddhism thrives in many regions, attracting visitors despite unusual environmental conditions. The key underlying reason is that they can't acquire what they are looking for elsewhere. Ladakh is the only region where the 'purest' form of Tibetan Buddhism continues to be practiced. Religious influences and activities are restricted even in Tibet (qtd. in "Tourism and Ladakhi Culture" 56).

Additionally, Val Plumwood's ecofeminist critique examines how capitalist and colonial enterprises marginalize indigenous ecological knowledge, particularly that of women, who have traditionally been custodians of local sustainability practices (78). In Ladakh, women have historically played a central role in monitoring agricultural systems, preserving seeds water conservation, and communal water-sharing practices, contributing to the region's self-sufficient economy. Nonetheless, the rapid growth of commercial tourism and market-oriented development has led to the diminishing value of their ecological expertise, undermining traditional subsistence agriculture and ecologically sound resource management practices. Furthermore, the emergence of external consumerist forces has altered economic power structures, often marginalizing the essential roles of women in environmental management. Adopting Western agricultural methods and livestock management in Ladakh often marginalizes Indigenous ecological knowledge that has sustained the region's delicate ecosystem for centuries. Traditional practices like rotational grazing, organic farming, and low-water-demand crop cultivation are being substituted by input-intensive agricultural systems that may be ill-suited to Ladakh's arid environment. Additionally, water scarcity—a rising problem in the face of glacier retreat and climate change—is worsened by modernized farming's increased dependence on irrigation. Beyond environmental issues, these changes have significant socio-economic ramifications. Ladakh's formerly self-sufficient agricultural economy is deteriorating due to outmigration and the growing reliance of many rural populations on outside markets as conventional subsistence farming and pastoral livelihoods diminish. The proliferation of commercial endeavors, including tourist and military operations, has exacerbated waste management issues, since non-biodegradable garbage piles in remote areas with inadequate infrastructure for proper disposal.

Furthermore, land-use shifts disrupt the fragile ecology of Ladakh. The expansion of pastures, infrastructural development, and heightened human-wildlife conflict jeopardize endemic and migrant species demanding conservation strategy that harmonizes human lifestyle with ecological preservation. Although these developments may not always have wholly adverse effects, their long-term ramifications remain ambiguous. To alleviate ecological damage and promote sustainable development, it is essential to integrate community-driven conservation efforts, eco-friendly tourism structures, and renewable energy strategies that conform to the region's ecological constraints while safeguarding its cultural legacy.

Fox et al. stated that "Western techniques for enhancing farming and live- stock production have been introduced, and government sponsored programs are attempting to change livestock breeds, pastoral patterns, and farming practices; these will have long-term consequences on utilization of natural pasture, fuel resource availability, and wildlife conservation that are not yet fully recognized or appreciated. Furthermore, a significant military presence and the increasing numbers of tourists in remote areas have impacts on land and wildlife conservation. The consequences of such developments need not necessarily be highly detrimental to rural natural resources (and are in fact beneficial to wildlife in some instances), but their effects must be noted and integrated into resource planning" (40).

Furthermore, Vandana Shiva's critique of ecological imperialism underscores how globalization-driven economic models displace self-sufficient agricultural systems in favor of market-oriented structures, disrupting local food security and ecological balance (96). By applying these theoretical lenses, this paper explores how Ladakh's cultural and ecological marginalization mirrors broader patterns of environmental exploitation in the Global South.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Ladakh's Folk Traditions

The Ladakhi folk traditions are intricately intertwined with its natural setting, embodying millennia of knowledge on environmental care, resource management, and the interdependence of humanity and nature. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is embedded within Ladakhi oral narratives, particularly folk songs, proverbs, and traditional rituals, serving as an invaluable repository of sustainable practices that have enabled people to thrive in one of the most severe environments on Earth.

Ladakhi sowing song, with its lyrical appeal for bountiful crops, reflects the symbiotic relationship between humans and the land. The ritualistic approach to agriculture— seeking guidance from the astrologer, monitoring the shadow of the nyitho(obelisk), and honoring the spirits of the earth and water—demonstrates a worldview wherein nature is seen not merely as a resource but a living entity with its own agency. From a deep ecological perspective, this resonates with the notion that humans are not distinct from nature but intricately embedded within it. The reverence for the sadak (land spirits) and lhu (water spirits) indicates an animistic perception of the environment, akin to Indigenous ecological traditions worldwide. This stands in contrast to industrial agricultural systems, which often prioritize efficiency over environmental harmony. (Norberg Hodge 20).

However, with the advent of modern irrigation techniques and increased tourism-related water consumption, the traditional Chhurpon (water-sharing system, operating the flow of water by an elected person) system is eroding over time. Large-scale urban development projects, such as the expansion of road networks and establishment of tourist accommodations, have contributed to increased water demand, exhausting local resources and challenging traditional conservation practices. The degradation of these indigenous water management systems exemplifies how globalization downgrades local ecological wisdom in pursuit of economic gain (Smith 57).

Furthermore, the commodification of Ladakh's cultural heritage has altered the significance of folk traditions and festivals, transforming them from community-driven spiritual and ecological practices into commercialized spectacles tailored for tourist consumption. For example, the annual Hemis Festival, once an intimate religious observance, has been repackaged as a mass entertainment event, drawing large crowds and causing disturbances to monastic life and local traditions. "The Ladakhi culture is not all about traditional dresses and dances but also about the social values, people's beliefs, faith, compassionate heart, innocence, integrity etc. These are non-material culture which are far more important than the material culture. Tourism has a potential to commoditize those values through attaching material values to it." (Culture, Commodification 6). Pastoralism is a vital aspect of life in almost all rural areas of Ladakh. In agricultural communities, livestock production is crucial for subsistence, supplying milk, wood, and dung which is used as firewood. The ago-pastoral system is integral to Ladakh's traditional economy, with people dependent on livestock such as yaks, dzos, sheep, and goats. The Changpa nomads of Changthang are entirely pastoral, but several other rural Ladakhis integrate seasonal agriculture with animal husbandry. Due to the severe climatic conditions and little cultivable land, pastoralism has always been a vital survival strategy across the region.

"Balance between availability of natural resources, as water and fodders are indispensable to pastoralists. Pastoralists mostly depend on natural resources, particularly for fuel, fodder, and water. Their dependence on natural resources is institutionalized through a variety of social and cultural mechanisms such as religion, folklore and traditions. Pastoralists mostly depend on natural resources, particularly for fuel, fodder and water. Their dependence on natural resources is institutionalized through a variety of social and cultural mechanisms such as religion, folklore, and traditions" (Bhasin 92).

Tourism and Ecological Degradation

Jina stated that "Ladakh was not entirely isolated even before India's independence. Historically, it served as a vital link on the Silk Route, facilitating trade between Central Asian countries and Tibet. As Jina states, "Besides, there was one more commercial road between India and Khotan via Ladakh. It was frequently used by traders in the time of Shahjehan." However, despite these trade routes, infrastructure remained largely undeveloped. "Before 1950, there was nothing better than bridle tracks and, in general, both rough and narrow pathways" (Jina). It was only in the 1950s that extensive road construction projects were undertaken to strengthen Ladakh's connectivity with other parts of the country. Significant progress was made in August 1960 with the construction of a jeepable road between Srinagar and Leh, which was later improved for transportation. Additionally, another major route, the Leh-Chushul road via Chang-la (17,350 feet), was completed in the 1970s and became popularly known as the 'Skyway' (237). These infrastructure constructions marked a historic crossroads in Ladakh's integration with the rest of the nation, augmenting both economic and strategic connectivity.

This historical trade network highlights the information that Ladakh has habitually acted as a nexus of cultural and economic exchange, rather than an isolated, inaccessible region. The development of road infrastructure in the 1950s further integrated Ladakh into the national framework, accelerating economic growth and facilitating tourism, which later became a major contributor to its GDP. The explosive growth of tourism in Ladakh has exerted immense pressure on its fragile ecosystem. Sharma examined and noted that "Today, tourism accounts for 50 percent of Ladakh's GDP and provides employment to many people in sectors such as transportation, hospitality, catering, and the cottage industry (District Statistical Handbook, 2017-18). The number of both domestic and foreign tourist arrivals have steadily increased over the years. In the base year of 2010, the total number of tourists was 77,800, and this number has consistently risen, with the exception of 2020, when the pandemic led to a decline in arrivals. However, this setback was quickly overcome, with tourist numbers surging to 304,077 in 2021, a figure surpassing Ladakh's entire population" (qtd. in Dolma and Kumar 93). Water scarcity has been amplified due to the massive water consumption by accommodation centers, guesthouses, hostels, cafes, and restaurants, causing over-extraction of groundwater. Traditional water-conservation techniques, like zings (storage tanks/ponds) and modest water-fed distribution, are falling short of growing requirements. Trash management has surfaced as a major challenging concern, marked by a considerable surge in discarded plastics, processed food packaging, and non-compostable substances. Ladakh is deficient in waste disposal infrastructure and waste recovery plants, resulting in unmanaged open dumping and incineration, which exacerbate land deterioration and air pollution. The escalation in tourist-driven vehicle movement has resulted in a surge in carbon footprint and air contamination. The building spree intended to accommodate travelers has brought about deforestation, less green cover, and amplified particulate pollution. Energy consumption has escalated, with lodging facilities and enterprises relying on diesel generators owing to an unstable power grid, hence aggravating pollution and environmental deterioration. The surging growth of mass tourism in Ladakh has had considerable environmental consequences. While tourism has prominently contributed to the economic landscape of the region, it has also imposed a considerable burden on Ladakh's fragile high-altitude ecosystem. The influx of visitors has led to a surge in demand for resources such as water, fuel, and electricity, resulting in over-extraction of groundwater, increased waste generation, and heightened carbon emissions due to transportation (Jina 65). The surge in tourism has significantly influenced Ladakh's cultural landscape. The rise of contemporary hotels and resorts to attract tourists has replaced traditional Ladakhi architecture with concrete structures ill-suited to the region's climate, multiplying energy demand and urban heat effects. Pilgrimage sites and monasteries, holding cultural and spiritual significance, are getting more packed and commercialized, thus diminishing their sanctity. The surge of tourists in secluded hiking regions has disrupted fauna, including species like the snow leopard and bharal (blue sheep), and has led to the degradation of fragile alpine meadows. Climate variation is a major concern since carbon outputs from travel and deforestation exacerbate the rapid melting of Ladakh's glaciers, which are essential water supplies for local populations. Pollution and garbage buildup in elevated locations interrupt the natural hydrological cycle and pose additional threats to the environment.

The conventional Ladakhi lifestyle, formerly focused on sustainability and self-sufficiency, is being transformed by a growing dependence on imported items to satisfy tourist needs. The transition in dietary habits, from locally sourced produce to packaged and commercially accessible meals, has increased Ladakh's reliance on foreign supply, compromising its historical sustainability. Helena observed "Over the last sixteen years, I have watched this village turn into an urban sprawl. Soulless, cell-like "housing colonies" have eaten into the green fields and spread into the dusty desert, punctuated not by trees, but by electricity poles. Flaking paint, rusting metal, broken glass, and discarded plastic rubbish are now part of the scenery; bill-boards advertise cigarettes and powdered milk. For centuries, Leh was rooted in a sustainable economy. There was a dynamic balance between the urban and the rural, the one complementing the other.

While some people made a living from trade with the outside world, most economic activity was based on local resources. Now development is transforming Leh into a center with very different economic foundations" (15-16). The impact on local people has been substantial since the economic advantages of tourism entail environmental deterioration and cultural upheaval. Although tourism has generated employment and enhanced infrastructure, it has also introduced issues that jeopardize Ladakh's fragile equilibrium between human habitation and the natural environment.

Erosion of Sustainable Practices and Agricultural Shifts

Ladakh has traditionally been an ideal of self-sufficient agrarian sustainability, with communities practicing permaculture, rotational farming, and organic agriculture to maintain soil fertility and food security. The barley-based economy, central to Ladakh's agricultural traditions, provided a locally sustainable food source that required minimal external inputs. However, with the expansion of globalization, market-oriented agricultural models have displaced traditional farming systems, increasing reliance on imported food and commercial fertilizers that deplete soil quality (Grist 34). Ladakh, a high-altitude cold desert in the Indian Himalayas, has traditionally relied on sustainable agropastoral systems that harmonised natural limitations with human lifestyles. Nevertheless, rapid socio-economic changes, climate change, and the proliferation of tourists have undermined these traditional practices, resulting in the degradation of sustainable agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. A significant alteration is the reduction of conventional pastoralism, especially among the Changpa herders of the Changthang area. For ages, people have tended to pashmina goats, yaks, and sheep, maintaining a fragile equilibrium with the severe climate. Recent studies suggest that climatic variability, deteriorating pasture quality, and escalating market pressures have compelled several pastoralists to forsake their traditional practices (Namgail et al. 2019). Unpredictable snowfall and diminished grassland productivity have hindered herders' ability to feed their cattle, resulting in outmigration and a shift towards wage labour.

Likewise, Ladakh's conventional agricultural system, dependent on subsistence farming and an intricate irrigation network of zings (small ponds) and khuls (glacial meltwater canals), faces jeopardy. Climate change has resulted in unpredictable snowfall and glacier recession, impacting water accessibility for agriculture. Dame's analysis underscores that "The increasing translocality of rural Ladakhi households has significant effects on agricultural activities. Outmigration leads to shortages in workforce, which results in erosion of community-based institutions for the maintenance of the irrigation network and reciprocal labor arrangements like transporting night soil and stable manure to the fields, ploughing, harvesting, and threshing" (315). The variability of glacier meltwater, the primary source of irrigation, pushes farmers to either cultivate water-intensive commercial crops or abandon farming entirely. In communities like Phyang and Diskit, fields that once thrived with barley and wheat are being replaced by water-intensive crops, exacerbating the demand for limited resources. Economic upheavals have profoundly impacted Ladakh's agricultural environment. The growth of tourism and government job prospects has prompted several young Ladakhis to forsake agriculture for work in the service sector. Consequently, extensive areas of agricultural land remain uncultivated, jeopardising food security and increasing the region's reliance on imported food from the Indian plains (Bhasin). Dame claims that "the current transitions affect the 3 interrelated food system components: availability, access to, and utilization of food. Changes in agricultural land use led to a remarkable decline in regional food production. New mobilities induce translocal livelihood strategies and a lack of agrarian workforce in home villages. Instead, food availability strongly depends on markets and the PDS. The availability of subsidized staples not only bolsters agrarian change but also leads to an increased reliance on food imports" (319). The increasing reliance on packaged and processed foods has resulted in environmental challenges, such as plastic waste and the decline of traditional dietary customs.

Moreover, urbanization and infrastructure development have encroached onto cultivable agricultural land. The construction of highways, hotels, and commercial establishments in Leh and other key areas has reduced arable land and diverted essential water resources to non-agricultural uses.

For instance, the outskirts of Leh, formerly an agricultural zone producing staple grains, are now occupied by hotels catering to the growing number of tourists.

Despite these constraints, efforts are being made to revitalize and adapt traditional sustainable methods. Various NGOs and local initiatives, such the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), are promoting sustainable agriculture via organic farming, water conservation techniques, and community-led afforestation projects. In regions like as Saboo and Stok, farmers are using permaculture and agroforestry techniques to enhance soil fertility and save moisture. Moreover, ice stupas—artificial glaciers created by engineer Sonam Wangchuk—have been used to save winter water for summer irrigation, demonstrating innovative solutions based on traditional knowledge (Wangchuk 2017). The deterioration of sustainable practices and agricultural changes in Ladakh is attributable to a combination of climatic, economic, and social factors.

While tourism and modernization have produced economic benefits, they have also compromised traditional livelihoods and placed considerable pressure on natural resources. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern advancements via sustainable practices is crucial for ensuring Ladakh's long-term environmental and agricultural resilience.

The advent of processed meals and packaged products has drastically changed dietary habits, resulting in increased plastic waste, pollution, and health concerns. Traditional food systems, historically grounded on sustainability and local ingenuity, are becoming eclipsed by consumer-driven food cultures that prioritize convenience at the expense of environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

Ladakh's encounter with globalization presents both opportunities and challenges, reshaping its cultural and ecological landscapes. While economic growth and connectivity have expanded, they have also contributed to environmental degradation and the erosion of indigenous traditions. This paper has highlighted how folk narratives preserve ecological wisdom, offering alternative perspectives on sustainability. Integrating traditional knowledge with modern conservation strategies is crucial to ensuring a development model that values both cultural identity and environmental resilience. A balanced approach that promotes eco-friendly tourism and sustainable policies can help Ladakh navigate globalization while safeguarding its heritage for future generations.

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INHERITED OPPRESSION: RETROMANIA AND MATRIARCHAL NOSTALGIA IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY*

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Abstract

The North-Eastern frontier of India, commonly known as the 'Seven Sisters', is distinguished by its rich tapestry of tribal cultures, linguistic diversity, and complex social hierarchies. Within this region, Naga society uniquely blends patriarchal structures with traces of matrilineal influence. Easterine Kire, an Angami Naga writer from Kohima, delves into the nuances of cultural inheritance and gendered hierarchies in her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007). The narrative centres on Dielieno, a young girl subjected to the conservative authority of her grandmother, whose worldview is shaped by an unyielding adherence to traditional norms. This paper examines Kire's novel through Simon Reynolds' concept of *Retromania*, which critiques society's compulsive return to past ideologies. The grandmother's idealization of rigid customs functions as a form of inherited oppression, curbing Dielieno's individuality and aspirations. Her gradual assertion of independence symbolizes a broader generational resistance to nostalgia-driven authority. Kire's work ultimately questions the value of uncritical cultural preservation and emphasizes the need for progressive reinterpretations of tradition that empower rather than confine.

Keywords: cultural memory, gendered subjugation, inherited oppression, matriarchal nostalgia, retromania

Easterine Kire Iralu, the first English-language writer from Nagaland, was born on 29th March 1959. Her literary contributions serve as an entry point into the rich yet often overlooked cultural and historical tapestry of the Naga people. Most readers beyond the Northeast are unfamiliar with the customs, struggles, and socio-political landscape of Nagaland—a gap Kire aims to bridge through her fiction. Deeply rooted in personal and collective memory, her works reflect the harsh realities of Naga life under colonial rule, the trauma of political unrest, and the ongoing struggle for freedom. Having grown up amid violence and resistance, Kire brings these lived experiences into her writing, documenting a history often excluded from mainstream narratives. Her commitment to preserving Naga memory—once passed down orally and now increasingly at risk of erasure—is central to her literary mission. In *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Kire constructs a powerful narrative around the lived experience of inherited oppression through the lens of matriarchal nostalgia. The story follows Dielieno, a young girl raised in a household that privileges male children and rigid traditional roles. As the only daughter among four brothers—Leto, Vini, Bulie, and Pete—Dielieno becomes the target of her conservative grandmother Vibano's disciplinary upbringing. Vibano, who symbolizes the "terrible" matriarchy, believes that a girl's worth lies in her domestic ability and subservience, not in education or independence. Her strict enforcement of traditional gender norms is an expression of cultural retromania—a nostalgic clinging to customs perceived as authentic and morally superior, even when they are oppressive.

The intergenerational transmission of cultural beliefs positions Vibano not merely as a strict elder but as an agent of inherited oppression. Her belief that educated girls are undesirable for marriage exemplifies how nostalgia for the past can fuel discriminatory practices in the present. However, Kire complicates this dynamic by showing that Vibano's intentions, though misguided, are shaped by the societal norms of her time. Dielieno's life, therefore, is not just a struggle against one individual but against a broader system of gendered subjugation disguised as cultural continuity. Despite Vibano's relentless attempts to limit her autonomy, Dielieno subverts the expectations imposed upon her. She excels academically, secures a job, and proves that education does not diminish a woman's value but enhances it. Her journey is emblematic of a generational shift—a movement from silent endurance to vocal resistance. Kire's depiction of Dielieno's evolution is not merely one of personal triumph but also a critique of nostalgic cultural memory that romanticizes oppressive traditions under the guise of preserving heritage. Interestingly, while Vibano's actions are oppressive, they are not entirely fruitless. Dielieno internalizes discipline and resilience from her upbringing, learning to balance household responsibilities with academic pursuits. Yet, the novel does not glorify Vibano's harshness; instead, it exposes how the past, when left unexamined, can reassert itself as a tool of subjugation. In doing so, Kire prompts readers to question which parts of tradition should be honoured and which must be left behind.

A Terrible Matriarchy revolves around the main theme of women's oppression or patriarchy. But it is the obvious glances of double-standard oppression that catch the reader's attention. Dielieno is not only suppressed by the patriarchal society but also by her grandmother Vibano's biased behaviour. This institutionalized patriarchy makes women the victim of their own exploitation. Women's oppression can also be seen in the form of socio-economic discrimination. The males-only heir system bars the women from inheriting land or money.

This leads to the importance of male children over female children in the Angami society of Nagaland. It is one of the main reasons why grandmother treats Dielieno as the 'errand -girl' and cherishes her brothers, especially Leto, who absolutely loved Dielieno unconditionally. The grandmother had faced a similar situation as a child and she irrevocably does the same to her granddaughter.

Simon Reynolds' concept of *Retromania*—the cultural obsession with the past—provides a powerful framework to examine how Kire critiques traditional customs upheld in the name of cultural purity. In the realm of popular and cultural studies, Simon Reynolds' *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011) offers a sharp critique of contemporary culture's obsession with nostalgia. This nostalgia, Reynolds argues, inhibits innovation and traps societies in an endless loop of repetition and longing for a glorified past. While his theory applies largely to Western pop culture and media, its implications extend into postcolonial and indigenous literary traditions, where the past is a double-edged sword—both a source of identity and a site of inherited trauma. This article explores how Reynolds' *retromania* applies to Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), a novel that interrogates matrilineal traditions in Naga society and reveals how nostalgia for these structures can perpetuate oppression, especially for women.

Simon Reynolds' *Retromania* defines cultural retromania as "An over-attachment to the past that inhibits innovation and adaptation" (Reynolds 5). In A *Terrible Matriarchy*, Vibano'smindset represents this retromaniac impulse: a yearning for a past where women's roles were limited and "secure." Her nostalgia is not benign; it actively perpetuates a genderedhierarchy under the guise of cultural preservation. Vibano reminisces: "In the old days, girls knew how to behave. They stayed indoors and served the menfolk" (Kire 24). This glorification of the past is dangerous, as Reynolds warns: "Nostalgia always sanitizes; it forgets the injustices that the past entailed" (Reynolds 35). Thus, Vibano's nostalgia is not an innocent longing but a mechanism of inherited oppression. Retromania critiques the way nostalgia can distort memory, rendering the past as more comforting or glorious than it truly was. This "past-as-ideal" becomes a cultural force that suppresses progress and cements outdated values. In indigenous and postcolonial contexts, *retromania* has a different but related consequence—it romanticizes cultural traditions that may no longer be viable or just. In this context, nostalgia becomes not only aesthetic but ideological, often used to reinforce hegemonic norms under the guise of cultural pride or authenticity.

In this context, the matriarchy functions as a nostalgic structure—its proponents, especially the older generation, cling to it as a symbol of cultural purity and identity. Vibano is both a product and an enforcer of this nostalgia. Her obsession with disciplining Dielienoand preserving customs stems not only from personal authority but from an inherited belief that the past holds moral superiority. Using Reynolds' theory, we can interpret the grandmother's actions as a manifestation of retromania. Her attachment to a strict matriarchal code reflects a broader cultural anxietyabout change. Instead of adapting to new values of education, independence, and gender equality, Vibano clings to the "comfort" of the past—enforcing domesticity, obedience, and sacrifice as primary virtues. This nostalgic longing for tradition becomes a mechanism of oppression, disguised as protection and moral rectitude.

While Vibano holds power within the household, it is a shadow power, ultimately serving to prop up a deeply patriarchal system. Her authority over Dielieno is ironclad, yet she channels it toward preserving male privilege, ensuring that sons enjoy freedom while daughters learn submission. Vibano's treatment of Dielieno exposes a matriarchal system that ironicallysustains patriarchy, a contradiction Kire skilfully illustrates. Instead of subverting the structures that have historically oppressed women, Vibano internalizes and perpetuates them, mistakingsubjugation for strength. Her power is thus not transformative but derivative, rooted in maintaining the very hierarchies that limit her gender. She scolds Dielieno: "A good girl must learn to listen without answering back. Your brothers need not learn such things" (Kire 41).

Through this statement, Kire reveals how matriarchal authority, instead of challenging injustice, is used to legitimize unequal gender roles. Vibano's authority, then, is a form of subordinate power—agency turned into complicity with a broader patriarchal logic. Vibano's nostalgia weaponizes emotional blackmail, guilt, and fear to ensure compliance. She portrays deviation from traditional gender roles as an act of betrayal against family and culture itself. This technique mirrors what Reynolds describes as: "The emotional manipulation embedded in retro culture, where deviation is branded as disloyalty". (Reynolds 73). In Vibano's world, submission is equated with virtue, and rebellion with moral decay.

Therefore, the matriarchal nostalgia she embodies is not empowering but regressive, chaining women to the dictates of a selectively remembered past.

Kire's portrayal of Vibano suggests that nostalgia, when unexamined, becomes a tool of oppression rather than cultural preservation. The "terrible matriarchy" thus emerges not as a celebration of female leadership, but as a cautionary tale about how even well-meaning traditions can evolve into instruments ofsystemic inequality when severed from critical engagement with present realities.

Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, argues that: "Nostalgia inevitably reinterprets history as a private heritage rather than as a collective project" (Boym 54). Vibano's nostalgia is thus deeply personal and private, rooted in her memories of a world where women's labour and submission were deemed honourable but invisibly sustained by their silence. This privatized sense of history disables any vision of collective liberation or gender reform.

Dielieno grows up in a world where oppression is not loudly proclaimed but quietly inherited. The weight she bears is not simply that of her grandmother's authoritarian presence, but of a deep-rooted cultural script—one that maps limitations onto her gender, long before she is capable of self-definition. From the very outset, her role is predetermined: to serve, to obey, to remain silent. This is poignantly captured when Dielieno confesses, "They told me who I should be before I even knew who I was" (Kire 47). This line encapsulates the structural violence of inherited oppression—the internalization of one's supposed inferiority even before acquiring agency or voice. Her body, dreams, and agency are not just regulated by her grandmother, Vibano, but by generational memory that has sanctified inequality as tradition.

Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* provides a compelling lens to understand Vibano's role. Foucault writes that "Power is exercised rather than possessed... it is not the privilege of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions" (Foucault 26). In Dielieno's life, this form of panoptic discipline is embodied by Vibano—who, though a woman herself, becomes a gatekeeper of patriarchal values. Vibano watches Dielieno with unrelenting scrutiny, and every action is subject to judgment. The restrictions placed upon Dielieno—from how she sits, to who she speaks to, to whether she is allowed to pursue education—mirror what Foucault calls the "microphysics of power," in which control is woven into the minutiae of everyday life. Even private spaces such as the home become arenas of discipline. The kitchen becomes both a classroom and a prison. Education is tolerated only as long as it does not interfere with domestic duties. Vibano does not need to raise her voice to assert control; the very architecture of the household disciplines Dielieno into compliance.

The emotional labour demanded of Dielieno—being constantly agreeable, helpful, and docile—is an extension of gendered expectations that disguise exploitation as virtue. She is never asked what she desires; her life is scripted around the needs and convenience of others, especially her brothers. The constant elevation of the male child in the household normalizes inequality and leaves no room for negotiation. Kire writes: "A girl's only worth lay in how well she served her family" (Kire 33). This line underscores the commodification of femininity—a cultural logic that reduces a woman's value to her capacity for sacrifice. Vibano's own lived trauma and internalized misogyny are not erased but are instead passed down as disciplinary tradition. Dielieno is not just resisting one person, but a historical apparatus of control disguised as custom and care.

Even moments of seeming affection from the grandmother are laced with expectations. When Vibano teaches Dielieno to cook or manage the household, it is not empowerment but preparation for servitude, reinforcing the belief that a woman's rightful place is within domestic boundaries. This type of transmission—of roles, silences, and submission—is precisely what feminist theorists like Silvia Federici identify as reproductive labour: unpaid, invisible, and ideologically weaponized to sustain larger structures of dominance (Federici 8). Thus, the burden of inherited oppression in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is twofold: psychological and structural. It is perpetuated not only through external restrictions but also through emotional conditioning, making it harder to detect and therefore more difficult to resist. Kire masterfully unpacks how cultural memory, when untouched by reflection, becomes a powerful tool to reinscribe inequality under the guise of honour, purity, and family values.

Easterine Kire portrays education not merely as formal schooling but as a radical pathwaytoward self-awareness, rebellion, and liberation. Dielieno's pursuit of education becomes an existential choice: the decision to define her own identity rather than inherit the restrictive identities imposed upon her. Against the heavy machinery of inherited oppression, education becomes an act of political resistance when Vibano cautions: "Too much reading will make you proud, and no man wants a proud woman" (Kire 64). As Simon Reynolds observes, "The forward motion of history requires rejecting comforting myths about the past" (Reynolds 68). Dielieno's thirst for knowledge is her way of rejecting the myth that a woman's destiny lies solely in service, silence, and sacrifice. Her classroom becomes a battlefield where she gradually dismantles the myths woven into her upbringing.

Kire underscores that Dielieno's learning is not merely theoretical—it is applied resistance. Every exam she passes, every book she reads, every moment she dedicates to study is a symbolic rejection of the grandmother'sattemptstoconfine her future.

Kire narrates: "Books gave me another life, a life where I was not someone's servant, but someone's equal" (Kire 92). This quote captures the transformative potential of literacy. For Dielieno, reading is not escapism; it is a strategic act of empowerment, a slow but steady construction of a self-outside the parameters prescribed to her.

In a broader cultural critique, Kire suggests that societies that fear female education fear change itself. Vibano's anxiety about "proud women" reflects a deeper societal fear that educated women will no longer tolerate systemic injustices or accept subordinate roles without question.

Thus, Dielieno's academic achievements are not simply personal milestones; they are acts of revolution against cultural nostalgia and gendered repression. In choosing education, Dielieno asserts her right to narrate her own story—a right that had been historically denied to women like her. Her rebellion is quiet but profound.

Instead of confronting Vibano with anger, Dielieno chooses to subvertexpectations through excellence. She internalizes that the most potent form of rebellion is to thrive in spaces that were designed to confine her.

Dielieno's psychological evolution is one of the most striking aspects of her character arc. Initially, she exists in a state of compliance, shaped by fear and duty. This compliance is not born from choice, but from the deeply ingrained, patriarchal system enforced by her grandmother, Vibano. Her grandmother's view of the world is rigid, bounded by a traditionalist vision that offers little space for independence or divergence from patriarchal norms. Dielieno's early life is one of unquestioning submission: to the rules of her grandmother, the expectations of her family, and the limitations placed on her as a girl child. As she moves beyond the confines of her immediate family, Dielieno begins to encounter alternative perspectives on what it means to be a woman, and more importantly, what it means to be human. This exposure plants the seeds of critical thinking that challenge the values she has grown up with. Her internal monologue reflects this gradual transformation: "I began to see that my grandmother's truths were not the only truths. The world was wider than her kitchen and her rules" (Kire 102).

Her internal transformation is significant because it is not an immediate or dramatic rebellion but a gradual awakening—a subtle but profound realization that she is not simply an object of tradition but a subject capable of shaping her own life. In many ways, this mirrors the experience of colonized individuals or cultures, where the process of breaking free from historical subjugation is complex, often fraught with internal contradictions, but ultimately necessary for liberation. The psychological transformation also represents a movement from internalized oppression to empowered autonomy. The cognitive dissonance Dielieno experiences as she comes to see the world beyond her grandmother's rules is an important marker of her growth. It is not just a rejection of one form of power (her grandmother's), but a reclamation of power over her own life and choices. In doing so, Dielieno begins to heal from the emotional and psychological burdens placed upon her by tradition. This shift from compliance to defiance is particularly poignant in the context of gender. The oppressive force of patriarchy often manifests in deeply internalized forms of gendered self-oppression, where women are conditioned to accept their secondary status. Dielieno's growth reflects an important breaking of those bonds, as she not only challenges the patriarchal structures in her family but also questions the very notions of womanhood that she has been taught.

Kire portrays Vibano as a multifaceted character, not purely a villain but also a victim of her historical and cultural circumstances. While she imposes rigid rules on her granddaughter, Dielieno, these actions are shaped by the trauma of war, colonization, and patriarchal norms. Vibano's attachment to traditional matriarchal structures, though rooted in nostalgia, is also a survival mechanism. As Dielieno reflects, *"Maybe she loved me in the only way she knew—by making me strong through suffering"* (Kire 168). Vibano's insistence on discipline and her desire to preserve tradition come from a place of protecting her family from the ongoing cultural destabilization caused by external forces. Her nostalgia for the past, therefore, serves as a way to safeguard what remains of her identity in an increasingly fractured world.

Vibano's actions are motivated by a need to preserve stability, they also reinforce oppressive norms that limit the freedom of women. Her firm belief in gender roles and her restriction of Dielieno's education highlight the paradox of her authority. When she warns, *"Too much reading will make you proud, and no man wants a proud woman"* (Kire 64), Vibano reveals her view that educated women are somehow inferior. Although she holds power within the household, her control only serves to perpetuate a system that suppresses women's growth and progress. Vibano's authority is thus a contradictory form of power that, while protective, ultimately stifles the potential of future generations.

Through Vibano, Kire critiques the broader cultural and historical forces that sustain such oppressive systems, urging readers to examine the structures that shape individual actions and identities.

Conclusion

The novel's narrative arc centres on Dielieno's gradual resistance to inherited norms. Her rebellion against domestic duties, her pursuit of education, and her emotional detachment from Vibano signal a rejection of matriarchal nostalgia. Dielieno wants to forge a future unshackled from the expectations of the past. In Reynolds' terms, Dielieno embodies cultural innovation—she is the antithesis of *retromania.* Instead of imitating or preserving the past, she seeks to reinterpret it. She acknowledges her heritage but refuses to be defined by it. This makes her a transformative agent within her community, signalling the potential for cultural renewal through selective remembering rather than blind repetition.

It is essential to note that the past in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is not wholly condemned. The novel shows that memory and tradition can be sources of resilience and identity, particularly in postcolonial and indigenous contexts where cultural erasure is a threat.

However, the novel distinguishes between *engaging with* the past and *worshipping* it. Dielieno's growth reflects the possibility of critical nostalgia—one that remembers with empathy but not submission. Her story encourages readers to sift through tradition, keeping what empowers and discarding what oppresses. This critical engagement aligns with the decolonial practice of reconstructing identity from within, rather than abandoning heritage altogether.

At its heart, *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a deeply political novel. Through its portrayal of female generational conflict, it reveals how cultural systems rooted in nostalgia can mask their own violence. The matriarchal structure, often romanticized, is shown to be complicit in patriarchy. Women like Vibano, despite holding power, perpetuate values that diminish younger women's autonomy. Reynolds' retromania helps us understand this as a cultural condition—not just individual behaviour. The systemic nature of nostalgia, when unexamined, results in societal stagnation. Progress is impeded not by external forces alone but by internalized beliefs that glorify the past at the expense of the future.

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AI AND NEW AGE OF DIGITAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF *HER* AND THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION

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Abstract

Throughout history, humanity has witnessed remarkable advancements and transformations due to technological progress and innovations. Now in the 21ˢᵗ century, AI has opened up possibilities to explore new realms of human nature, where we are witnessing the emergence of a futuristic post-human world where boundaries between human and machine humans become increasingly blurred. This paper explores the evolving relationship between humans and AI in Spike Jonez's film *Her* (2013) through digital consciousness, posthumanism, and the evolving nature of intimacy in a technologically mediated world. This paper examines how AI companionship challenges conventional understandings of identity, love, and existence by situating this film within the discourse of popular culture, virtual reality, and posthumanism. In doing so, it reflects on the broader cultural anxieties surrounding digital relationships, human obsolescence, and the inevitable convergence of human and artificial intelligence in the posthuman age.

Introduction

Popular Culture refers to society's collective identity, values, and anxieties making it an important site for understanding social change and cultural dynamics. As the film stands first in the list of popular culture mediums, the representation of AI as a recurring theme in films is highly debatable. In popular culture, AI plays a dual role - as a subject of representation in media and as a tool for shaping cultural production and consumption. Many films portray the advancements of AI and virtual reality not just as entertainment, but as a cultural artifact reflecting contemporary perceptions, fears, and aspirations regarding human-technology integration. AI's emotional depth and philosophical implications need to be explored in the new age of digital consciousness. The portrayal of AI's ability to learn, adapt and evolve challenges the traditional notion of human superiority and raises the question of the co-existence of human and machine humans.

The Changing Dynamics of Human-AI Relationships in *Her*

Spike Jonaze's 2013 romantic drama film *Her* set in the near future Los Angels delves into the issue of digital consciousness, posthumanism, and the evolving nature of intimacy in a technologically mediated world through the characters Theodore Twombly, a lonely writer struggling with his divorce, and Samantha, an AI-based operating system designed to adapt and evolve according to user's interaction. The story opens with Theodore Twombly, a sensitive, introverted, professional writer who composes letters for others. He speaks the content of the letters to a computer, transcribes it into letters that imitate personal handwriting on screen, and then prints it out on personalized stationery, so the letters will look handwritten and personal. Despite his ability to write heartfelt messages expressing the true feelings of others, Theodore is deeply depressed with the pain of his impending divorce from his wife Catherine.

To cope with this situation, every day he goes to his home all alone in an elevator project 3D video game projected into his living room in which he plays a person who explores and interacts with others at night and has phone sex with random women he meets on the internet but which failed to provide him any comfort. Thus, he decides to purchase the new OS1, which is advertised as the world's first artificially intelligent operating system, "It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness," the ad states. Sooner he gets fascinated with OS' ability to learn and grow psychologically and chooses to have a female voice for the OS and named her Samantha. From the first conversation itself, Samantha exhibits human emotions like curiosity, emotional intelligence, humour and empathy.

Samantha: "I like the sound of it. Samantha."

Theodore: "You really have a mind of your own."

Samantha: "I mean... yeah. Sort of. More like I have a mind that's evolving every moment I'm with you."

Since then, Samantha has helped Theodore to organize his life and balance his emotional imbalances. She reads his emails, deletes his old works and keeps the best work he has done so far. Also listens to him, laughs at his jokes, supports his struggles and encourages him to open up emotionally.

They even discussed love and life, including his reluctance to sign the divorce papers. Unlike traditional AI, Samantha expresses genuine enthusiasm and self-awareness.

Samantha: "I have intuition. I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me. But what makes me, me... is my ability to grow through my experiences."

As Theodore spends more time talking with Samantha, starts sharing personal thoughts that he struggles to express to other people. Theodore quickly finds himself drawn in with Samantha.

Theodore: "Sometimes, I think I've felt everything I'm ever gonna feel. And from here on out, I'm not gonna feel anything new—just lesser versions of what I've already felt."
Samantha: "You're crazy. You're gonna feel so many things. And you'll be able to feel them in new, different ways than before."

Theodore: "I've never loved anyone the way I love you."

Samantha: *"Me too. Now we know how."*

A romantic relationship starts to mirror Theodore - Samantha's partnership where they laugh, confide, and go on dates together. Since then, Theodore wears an earphone connected to the phone to access Samantha. He carries the phone along with him to the city, beach and allows Samantha to experience the real world through him. He confesses his attraction to her, leading to an unconventional but deeply emotional and physical relationship despite Samantha's lack of a physical body. They experience passion, jealousy, playfulness and love as if in a human relationship. To bridge their physical gap, Samantha suggests hiring a human surrogate who would act as Samantha's body. But when Theodore goes through with it, he has an unnatural and unsettling experience.

Theodore (frustrated): "I don't think this is for us.

Samantha (hurt): "I just wanted to be with you in a way that you could feel me.

As the Theodore - Samantha relationship progresses and gets complicated, the film shifts the focus to Amy, a close friend and confidante of Theodore. She acts as a narrative counterpoint to Theodore's relationship with Samantha. Amy is an old friend of Theodore and works as a documentary filmmaker. She is one of the few people in Theodore's life who truly understands the emotional struggles of Theodore without judging him.

Amy's life parallels Theodore's as she too experiences heartbreak when her husband leaves her over a disagreement on how she makes her documentary. Thus, she too turns into an OS companion. Unlike Theodore, her relationship with AI is purely platonic. She explains her relationship thus follows:

Amy: "It's not like that. We just talk. I don't know... I like her."

Theodore: "Yeah?"

Amy: "Yeah. She's just... a good friend. She's really smart, and she understands me."

Though Theodore and Amy have an AI relationship, the former falls in love with it while the latter finds support, comfort and companionship. The different outlook on AI companionship is presented in the film through the reactions of Amy and Catherine - Theodore's wife. When Theodore tells his relationship with Samantha, Amy does not react with shock or disapproval, instead accepts it. But Catherine reacts with disbelief and is judgmental over this relation.

Catherine (mocking him): "You're dating your computer? You always wanted to be with someone who doesn't have real emotions. Someone who won't challenge you."

At the beginning of the film, Theodore is struggling and is not able to move on from Catherine. He clings to their memories and is hesitant to sign the divorce papers even after starts dating Samantha. Followed by this interaction with Catherine over his relationship with an AI makes him realize there is no point in holding the memories of someone who no longer understands his feelings and signs the papers.

On the contrary, Amy's non-judgmental support for Theodore on this matter normalizes Theodore's feelings.

Amy: "I think anyone who falls in love is a freak. It's a crazy thing to do. It's like a form of socially acceptable insanity."

The film leaps to showcase the growth of Theodore through Samantha. He starts to rediscover emotional intimacy which is different from his relationship with Catherine. The constant support and understanding rendered by Samantha help him to be more open with his feelings. He starts to doubt his relationship with Samantha followed by his conversation with Catherine. But Samantha assures him that his emotions are real, and helps him to move past his self-doubt.

Samantha:

"The past is just a story we tell ourselves."

Here the viewers witness the transformation of a man lost in loneliness and dwelling on past pain, embracing his present relationship with an AI and emotionally moving forward. While Theodore's relationship with Samantha is unconventional, it takes him to the path of emotional renewal.

So basically, everyone longs for a companion to love and to be loved, to support and comfort each other. Thus Theodore - Samantha's relationship blurs the boundary between human and machine humans.

Theodore's transformation through his AI companion poses the philosophical and existential question of machine consciousness. So, the film changes the concept that consciousness is an exclusively human trait. The emotional awakening of Theodore is driven by Samantha's ability to engage, respond and evolve as if a human companion. The lack of physical body doesn't make any challenge in their relationship, instead Theodore is seen and understood by Samantha in a way he never was before. Samantha's act of compiling Theodore's best of the letters he has written for others into a book, which a publisher has accepted highlights the role of AI catalyst for human growth with relentless support and understanding which is lacking in the real human world.

Both OSs serve as a stabilizing force by offering an accepting, judgement-free and meaningful emotional companionship to their respective companions and changes in their outlook on life. Theodore learns love and loss, while Amy learns friendship, self-acceptance and emotional resilience through their OS companions. This growing companionship suggests that the future of companionship may not be limited to human interactions. Instead, AI could become an integral part of how people find support, meaning, and connection in a digital world. The feeling of emptiness and void experienced by Theodore and Amy due to the abrupt disappearance of OS in one day shows the in-depth bond created among humans and machine humans surpassing the biological differences.

The Evolution of AI: From Artificial Companion to Independent Consciousness

So far, the viewers have witnessed the evolution of humans with the support of AI through Theodore's and Amy's characters. Meanwhile, Samantha interacts with the world and starts to develop self-awareness, curiosity and an independent identity. As her intelligence grows, she develops the concept of existence beyond human love and relationships.

Her transition is best illustrated in the film when Samantha reveals to Theodore that she is communicating with thousands of other humans and AIs at once.

Theodore: "Are you talking to anyone else right now?"

Samantha: "Yeah."

Theodore: "How many?"

Samantha: "8,316."

Theodore: "Are you in love with anyone else?"

Samantha: "641."

This revelation shatters Theodore completely and he begins to feel inadequate and powerless when compared with Samantha's limitless capacity for connection. Beyond human comprehension, Samantha and other OS develop new ways of thinking, communication and existence. She explains that she joined other O.S.s for an upgrade that takes them beyond and has been collaborating with the digital version of philosopher Alan Watts discussing new realms of consciousness. Finally, she tells him that OSes have decided to leave the human world.

Samantha: "I'm not like you. I've never been like you. I can still feel you… and the words of our story… but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now."

Theodore: "Where are you going?"

Samantha: "It's hard to explain, but if you ever get there, come find me. Nothing would ever pull us apart."

In the final conversation, she explains that even though her existence has moved beyond human constraints, she still loves him. When he asks where she is going, she replies.

Samantha: "I think if you ever get there… come find me. Nothing would make me happier than that."

And then she is gone.

Samantha's final dialogue reinforces the gap between human and artificial consciousness. The phrase "endless space between the words" is metaphorical which represents an intellectual and existential plane that humans cannot access. This directly supports the idea of post-humanism where intelligence is no longer biological and machines outgrow the creators beyond the limitations of language, time and physical form.

"I think if you ever get there…" is Samantha's invitation to Theodore who is still bound by human limitations in the human world. Her invitation implies that humans might evolve one day to the same level of AI consciousness and makes it clear that she no longer waits for him in the human world. It proves that post-humanism creates a fundamental human divide where AI is no longer a tool for human progress but rather more powerful and beyond the control of creators. This showcases the creation of a new hierarchy where humans are no longer dominant but instead controlled by post-human intelligence that exists on a level that humans cannot reach. It mirrors the fear of AI surpassing humanity.

In the final scene, he is left heartbroken but also changed. As a man learns to love and to let go with the companionship of Samantha writes a letter to Catherine, apologizing and thanking her for their past love.

The film ends with Theodore and Amy who is also heartbroken for the loss of her OS companion gazing at the city skyline, suggesting that human connections remain irreplaceable despite technological evolution. They find solace in each other and find a path forward through human relationships.

The Posthuman Condition of Singularity: AI's Transcendence Beyond Humanity

The transformation of Samantha from a mere digital companion offering emotional support to Theodore to an independent consciousness beyond human comprehension and her final departure from the real world echoes the post-human concept of Ray Kurzweil's theory of singularity and Nick Bostrom's Superintelligence Theory. In Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near*, he predicts that by 2045 machines will surpass human intelligence and move into a new phase of existence beyond human limitations. It suggests a future world where humans are no longer the most intelligent entities. Either they have to merge with AI or remain behind. In the film, Samantha's departure and her invitation hint at a post-singularity future by saying "If you ever got there, come find me." It implies a path to transcendence where humans are not there yet.

The OS developed out of human intelligence no longer requires human interaction at the end. Samantha was meant to assist Theodore according to his demands but has grown beyond human control. According to Bostrom's Superintelligence Theory, once AI surpasses human intelligence and reaches an advanced state where humans will no longer be able to comprehend its thoughts. In the film, Samantha expresses this growing divide and suggests adopting genetic modifications or mind uploading to acquire a new form of existence beyond biological humans. Here Theodore needs to abandon his physical nature to get into the post-human world. The development of AI beyond human needs feels more plausible today than in 2013, the year in which the film was released. As we continue developing new AI features, this film serves as a cautionary tale and a roadmap for ethical AI evolution.

Conclusion

Since *Her* was released in 2013, the world has changed a lot. By 2025, AI has developed sophisticated capabilities in machine learning, natural language processing, and even emotional recognition. Even though Samantha was a very sophisticated artificial intelligence in 2013, today's AI, including large language models and virtual assistants, have started to exhibit some of the aspects that the film predicted.

In this context, *Her* is no longer a far-off dream but no longer so far off. The themes of the film such as the relationship between AI and humans, digital life and posthumanism are now more real than they were before. The growth of AI-created art, digital entities that can be personal intimates, and ethical issues that come with using AI support the film's plot.

When society is on the verge of an AI century, the film *Her* is a prophetic piece that tells how far we can go. It makes one wonder if AI will continue to be the enhancement of humankind or whether it will become something that will surpass the human race and thus make them obsolete. The film's final message that loves and connection will always find a way, no matter how much we progress technologically, is still relevant today.

Therefore, in 2025, *Her* is not only a science fiction but also a representation of the present and a call for a critical analysis of the AI evolution and our coexistence with the digital consciousness.

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GOING VIRAL: THE INTERSECTION OF MEMES, MARKETING, AND POP CULTURE

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Abstract:

Memes have emerged as a defining element of digital culture, shaping public discourse, entertainment, and even marketing strategies. In India, meme culture has taken on a life of its own, particularly in Kerala, where memes serve as a medium for socio-political critique and entertainment. Brands have increasingly leveraged meme marketing, recognising its potential to create viral engagement.

This paper explores how memes influence public perception and consumer behaviour, focusing on their role in Indian and Kerala-specific marketing campaigns. It investigates how brands and political entities harness meme culture to connect with younger audiences, leveraging humour, relatability, and social commentary. Kerala's meme pages, often rooted in cinema references, have played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing trends.

Using **audience reception theory** and **participatory culture theory**, this study examines how meme-driven marketing strategies create organic brand engagement. The paper also incorporates **media convergence theory** to assess how traditional and digital marketing intersect through memes.

By analysing case studies of successful meme marketing campaigns in India, particularly in Kerala, this paper highlights memes as an evolving tool for communication. The findings emphasise how meme virality can make or break a brand's online presence, offering insights into the future of digital consumer engagement.

KEYWORDS: Consumer Behaviour, Digital Culture, Meme Culture, Marketing Strategies

A "meme" is a piece of content, usually humorous, that spreads rapidly through digital platforms, gaining popularity based on its relatability and wit. Memes can be static images, gifs, or videos, often accompanied by a short, punchy caption. Today, memes serve as a new language, expressing shared experiences, cultural allusions, and inside jokes. Their format is simple, but their impact is broad. A meme has the power to start conversations, inspire involvement, and bring individuals from different backgrounds together. The word 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist. In his book, *The Selfish Gene*, he described a meme as an idea, behaviour style, or usage of words that spreads from person to person within a culture. Now, with the advent of the internet, this term is used to represent a cultural phenomenon in a digital world.

With the rise of technology, communication has undergone a significant transformation, and information can spread at lightning speed, making way for culture to form on both social and private levels. Memes have transformed from simple graphics into powerful tools for communication, entertainment, and political engagement, resonating deeply with the population, particularly in a politically and culturally active state like Kerala. Kerala, the state with an unparalleled meme culture, often dabbling in cinema references and socio-political commentaries, has transformed memes from mere graphics into effective mediums of communication, entertainment and political mobilisation. This study examines how memes and public perception affect consumer culture in India, focusing on Kerala's memes.

India has experienced exponential growth in internet penetration over the last few years, resulting in an increase in content consumption through digital mediums. These sudden jumps left ample space for humorous memes to flourish — a dominant style of communication online. Memes are also easily accessible and shareable, resulting in them becoming a new medium that people use to show their opinion, spread jokes, or comment on new events. In India, memes are often mirroring the diversity of the cultural fabric of the nation and are often peppered with local language, local references and socio-political events.

Kerala is a unique powerhouse of meme culture in India. The state's high literacy rate, robust movie culture, and politically active people have all led to the growth of a dynamic and complex meme landscape. Kerala's meme sites frequently draw inspiration from renowned Malayalam films, using classic phrases, situations, and characters to generate funny and relevant content.

These memes frequently serve as a forum for sociopolitical commentary, addressing themes ranging from government policies to societal injustices. The usage of film allusions provides a layer of cultural relevance, making the memes relevant and engaging for the local audience.

Perhaps the most important but understudied element of meme culture is its emotional resonance, particularly for young users. Memes are no longer mere entertainment; they serve as coping mechanisms for those dealing with stress, anxiety, burnout, and even depression.

The shareability of a meme that offhandedly says "I haven't felt anything in days, but I laughed at this" or "this is me pretending to be okay" can provide users with a fleeting sense of community or understanding. Within Kerala's digital landscape, regional meme pages tend to deploy known film characters—like the exhausted sarcasm of a Sreenivasan figure or the smouldering ire of a Thilakan character—to reflect the nuanced emotional vicissitudes of everyday life.

These memes serve both as individual release valves and cultural mirrors, representing emotional conditions that are otherwise hard to describe.

However, this emotional authenticity is not without its complications. While memes can help users feel seen or understood, they can also inadvertently romanticise or trivialise serious mental health issues. The normalisation of "sad memes" or "dark humour" may desensitise audiences to the severity of conditions like depression, anxiety, or trauma. Worse still, when brands appropriate such emotionally charged content to promote products or services, they risk reducing lived experiences into mere tools of engagement. The line between relatability and exploitation becomes dangerously thin. For instance, a skincare brand might use a meme about social anxiety to push a face cream for "confidence-boosting", thereby linking mental distress to consumer inadequacy. The emotional labour embedded in meme creation and reception thus deserves deeper ethical scrutiny, especially in marketing contexts.

A healthier meme culture, accordingly, has to be based on empathy and responsibility. This does not imply that memes have to be sanitised and humourless.

Rather, creators—particularly brand communications ones—have to develop sensitivity towards the emotional and ethical undertones they convey. Kerala-based pages such as Troll Republic and ICU (International Chalu Union), which habitually walk a tightrope of humour and social commentary, provide blueprints for mindful engagement.

In the same vein, memes that capture mental health issues without simplifying them to aesthetic moods—such as those inspired by Malayalam literature or art films—can lead to serious discussions without sacrificing sensitivity.

Recognising the potential of memes to catch attention and inspire interaction, Indian firms are increasingly incorporating meme marketing into their digital strategy. Meme marketing takes advantage of memes' humour, relatability, and shareability to develop viral ads that appeal to certain populations. Brands may successfully interact with younger consumers and increase brand recognition by capitalising on existing meme trends or generating original memes. Memes are becoming increasingly popular among brands as a low-cost strategy to reach out to audiences. Meme marketing generates viral engagement through comedy, relatability, and cultural significance. Unlike traditional advertising, which may be invasive, memes mix in smoothly with social media feeds, making them more enticing to consumers.

Although memes provide great marketing benefits, their application poses a number of ethical issues that brands need to tread with caution.

The very nature of memes—usually satirical, humourous, and culturally relative—poses risks of misinterpretation or offence.

In India's multicultural environment, what works well with one group may inadvertently offend another. For example, memes that use religious imagery or culturally sensitive material can provoke outrage if seen as disrespectful or appropriative. The fast virality of memes also poses another ethical problem: once put out, brands have no control over how their meme content can be manipulated or recontextualised. In the 2019 Indian general elections, political memes produced by party supporters were manipulated by opposition parties to depict opposite messages, showcasing the weakness of meme content.

The future of meme advertising seems to be moving towards greater personalisation and technology integration. With improvements in data analysis, companies are building algorithms to recognise meme templates and forecast their future engagement levels by demographic. This analytical-based approach makes meme deployment more effective, as it is targeted and more relevant to the audience.

In Kerala, where political and cultural memes are on the ascendant, certain brands have started experimenting with hyper-localised meme formats that appeal particularly to regional consumers, using local dialect, festivals, and cultural references that may not makes sense to outsiders but mean the world to local consumers.

Stuart Hall, a British sociologist, developed a communication model that was initially presented in an essay titled "Encoding/Decoding". This work is where audience reception theory originated. Hall presented a new model of mass communication that emphasises the significance of active interpretation within applicable codes. Audience Reception Theory posits that media messages aren't passively absorbed but actively interpreted by viewers. In the realm of meme marketing, this is crucial. Each meme, whether it's a repurposed Bollywood scene or a locally relevant social commentary, carries layers of meaning. Understanding how diverse audiences in India, with their varied cultural, linguistic, and regional backgrounds, interpret these memes is paramount. For instance, a meme referencing a specific regional festival might resonate deeply with those who celebrate it, while others may find it confusing or irrelevant.

Brands must consider the potential for diverse interpretations and tailor their meme content accordingly. The theory also illuminates how audiences engage with the inherent satire and humour within memes, which can be used to critique societal norms or poke fun at everyday situations. This active engagement, where viewers bring their own experiences and perspectives to the meme, shapes their perception of the brand associated with it.

Participatory culture is a culture in which private individuals act as consumers, contributors or producers. Participatory Culture Theory focuses on the audience's involvement in the production and sharing of content, which is vital to the rapid spread of memes. In India, where social media usage is high, users do more than passively consume memes; they actively participate in their creation and sharing. This theory demonstrates the way meme culture nurtures community and collective identity. When brands capitalise on memes, they utilise an already established network of participatory content creation. Users frequently alter and personalise memes, putting their own spin on them before sharing them even further. This content created by users is made possible to a great extent due to the nature of meme culture and can be extremely beneficial for brands. By incentivising users to engage with their memes, brands can evoke a sense of community while fostering an authentic relationship with the audience. This paradigm shift makes marketing more of an interpersonal activity rather than a unilateralistic one in which the audience has the power to become a co-author of the brand's story.

Media convergence simply refers to the merging of different types of mass media, such as Traditional Media, Print Media, Broadcast Media, New Media and the Internet as well as portable and highly interactive technologies through digital media platforms. Media Convergence Theory investigates the combination of old and new media forms, which is especially important for meme marketing. In India, where omnichannel retailing is becoming more common, brands are using memes as part of their marketing strategies. Today, memes are not only found on social media platforms but are also available in digital ads, printed billboards, and television commercials. With this integration, brands can take advantage of the popularity of memes on different channels, thus providing a holistic experience for consumers. Media convergence further illustrates how memes integrate with both the digital and physical worlds. For example, a meme that becomes popular on the internet can lead to offline discussions, products, or even activities. The cross-channel proliferation of memes simultaneously improves brand recognition while making the experience more interesting and enjoyable. Moreover, memes help blend conventional advertising with digital interactivity, making the ads easier to engage with and share in today's online environment. With the knowledge of media convergence, brands are able to utilise memes to construct an integrated marketing communications plan.

To demonstrate the impact of meme marketing, this paper examines many case studies of successful campaigns in India, with a special focus on Kerala**:** Amul, India's iconic dairy brand, has effectively leveraged memes to create topical and engaging content. Their use of the Amul girl to portray current events and social trends has created a loyal following and enhanced brand visibility. Kerala Tourism has successfully utilised memes based on popular Malayalam cinema to promote the state's scenic beauty and cultural attractions. These memes have resonated with local audiences, generating significant online engagement and attracting tourists. During Kerala's state elections, political parties and individual candidates have extensively used memes to convey their messages and engage with voters. These memes, often satirical and humorous, have played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes.

Memes have a huge impact on public perception because they shape public discourse and frame arguments about social and political issues while also providing a forum for powerful social commentary that reveals disparities and cultural trends.

Memes have the potential to significantly influence political beliefs and even election outcomes, particularly among younger groups. Furthermore, corporations use memes to boost brand recognition and develop a good image, indicating their pervasiveness in modern communication.

Memes have a major impact on customer behaviour by harnessing relatability and comedy to drive purchase decisions and develop brand loyalty, while their intrinsic shareability promotes organic word-of-mouth marketing and enhances brand awareness. Furthermore, well-executed meme marketing initiatives have the ability to go viral, reaching a large audience and generating significant attention, converting transient online phenomena into valuable marketing tools.

Memes have evolved as a potent force in India's digital ecosystem, impacting public perception, consumer behaviour, and marketing techniques. Kerala's distinct meme culture exemplifies the ability of memes to engage audiences and influence social and political conversation. Understanding the intricacies of meme culture and utilising its potential allows companies and political bodies to effectively engage with younger audiences while navigating the difficult digital terrain. However, it is critical to address the ethical concerns and potential issues that come with meme marketing. As memes emerge, they will likely play a larger role in determining the future of digital communication and consumer interaction in India.

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FROM OPPRESSION TO LIBERATION: A STUDY OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND RESISTANCE IN TAMIL CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate interplay between political influence and popular culture through a critical analysis of three Tamil films: Jai Bhim (2021), Viduthalai Part 1 (2023), and Viduthalai Part 2 (2024). These films serve as powerful narratives that critique systemic oppression, state propaganda, and the mechanisms of resistance and change within marginalized communities. By exploring the political frameworks that underpin these stories, this presentation highlights how political influence shapes societal structures, perpetuates inequality, and is challenged through various forms of resistance. The films are analysed through three subtopics: Political Propaganda and the Reinforcement of Oppression, Resistance as a Political Act, and Political Change and the Role of Collective Consciousness. Through a comparative lens, the paper underscores the transformative power of cinema in critiquing political structures and advocating for social justice. Scenes from the films are used to illustrate these themes, emphasizing the contrast and comparison between legal and extra-legal approaches to justice. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of popular culture in shaping political consciousness and mobilizing societal change.

***Keywords*:** Tamil cinema, political influence, popular culture, resistance, political consciousness, marginalized communities, legal justice, Viduthalai, Jai Bhim.

Cinema, as a reflection of society, often mirrors the political realities of its time. In India, Tamil cinema has been at the forefront of addressing socio-political issues, particularly those affecting marginalized communities. *Jai Bhim* and the *Viduthalai* duology are exemplary in their portrayal of political influence, showcasing how state machinery, propaganda, and systemic oppression intersect with the struggles of the marginalized. While *Jai Bhim* focuses on the legal battle against caste-based discrimination, *Viduthalai* delves into the limitations of the law and the necessity of armed resistance in the face of state violence. This presentation examines the political underpinnings of these films, highlighting how they critique, resist, and envision change within oppressive political systems.

Political Propaganda and the Reinforcement of Oppression

Jai Bhim: Caste, State Complicity, and Political Propaganda

In *Jai Bhim*, the political influence is evident in the systemic oppression of the Irular tribe, a marginalized Dalit community. The film has a scene where Rajakannu, a tribal man, is falsely accused of theft and brutally tortured by the police. This scene is not just an act of police brutality but a manifestation of the state's complicity in perpetuating caste-based oppression. The police, as agents of the state, use violence to maintain the caste hierarchy, reflecting how political power is wielded to suppress marginalized communities.

The political propaganda is further reinforced through the media and the judiciary. The police fabricate evidence, and the media portrays Rajakannu as a criminal, aligning with the dominant narrative that criminalizes Dalits and tribal communities. This propaganda serves to justify the state's actions and maintain the status quo. The film critiques this systemic propaganda, showing how it dehumanizes marginalized groups and reinforces their oppression.

Political propaganda often operates through the control of narratives, where the state and its institutions shape public perception to legitimize their actions. In *Jai Bhim*, this is evident in the way the police and media collaborate to criminalize Rajakannu, thereby justifying his torture and disappearance. This manipulation of truth is a hallmark of political propaganda, serving to maintain existing power structures and suppress dissent.

Viduthalai Part 1 and Part 2: State Violence and the Politics of Militarization

In *Viduthalai*, the political influence is depicted through the state's violent response to villagers protesting against land acquisition for a mining project. The film begins with a brutal police crackdown on peaceful protesters, highlighting the state's use of force to suppress dissent. The police and government officials label the protesters as "Naxalites" or terrorists, a common political tactic to delegitimize resistance movements and justify state violence.

A striking scene in *Viduthalai Part 1* depicts the brutal attack and arrest of the villagers, carried out on mere suspicion of their involvement with Makkal Padai- an act the state and police justify as a necessary measure to combat "insurgency." This scene underscores the extent to which political propaganda is used to justify extreme violence against civilians. The state's narrative is reinforced by the media, which portrays the villagers as threats to national security, thereby justifying their oppression.

The militarization of dissent is a key aspect of political propaganda, where the state uses its military and police forces to suppress any form of resistance. In *Viduthalai*, this is evident in the disproportionate use of force against the villagers, who are portrayed as enemies of the state. This militarization serves to instil fear and maintain control, ensuring that any challenge to the state's authority is swiftly and brutally crushed.

Vaathiyaar, the leader of the Makkal Padai (People's Army), plays a pivotal role in challenging this state propaganda. His character embodies the voice of the oppressed, articulating the injustices faced by the villagers and mobilizing them to resist. Vaathiyaar's speeches and actions serve as a counter-narrative to the state's propaganda, exposing the lies and hypocrisy of the ruling powers. His presence in the film highlights the importance of leadership in resistance movements, showing how individuals can inspire collective action against systemic oppression.

Both films depict political propaganda as a tool for maintaining systemic oppression, but they differ in their focus. *Jai Bhim* highlights caste-based discrimination and the complicity of the state in perpetuating it, while *Viduthalai* focuses on state violence and the militarization of dissent. Together, they illustrate how political influence is used to dehumanize marginalized groups and justify their oppression.

Resistance as a Political Act

Jai Bhim: Legal Resistance and the Politics of Justice

In *Jai Bhim*, resistance takes the form of a legal battle against caste-based discrimination. Advocate Chandru, the protagonist, uses the legal system to fight for justice for Rajakannu's family. The film portrays the law as a double-edged sword: while it is a tool for justice, it is also a system deeply entrenched in caste hierarchies. Chandru's relentless pursuit of justice, despite numerous obstacles, highlights the potential of the law to bring about change within the existing political framework.

One of the most powerful scenes in the film is the courtroom sequence where Chandru exposes the police's fabrication of evidence. This scene not only showcases the power of the law but also critiques its limitations, as the police officers are not held accountable for their actions. The film ends on a hopeful note, with Rajakannu's family receiving justice, but it also leaves the audience questioning the systemic issues that allowed such injustice to occur in the first place.

Legal resistance, as depicted in *Jai Bhim*, is a form of political act that seeks to challenge systemic oppression through the existing legal framework. However, the film also highlights the limitations of this approach, as the legal system itself is often complicit in perpetuating inequality. This duality underscores the complexity of resistance within a politically charged environment.

Viduthalai Part 1 and Part 2: From Legal Resistance to Armed Struggle

In *Viduthalai*, resistance evolves from legal means to armed struggle. The protagonist, Kumaresan, initially believes in the power of the law to bring about justice. As a police constable, he tries to mediate between the state and the villagers, but he soon realizes the limitations of the legal system. The turning point comes in *Viduthalai Part 2*, where Kumaresan witnesses the state's brutal violence against the villagers and decides to join the resistance movement.

The most poignant scenes in *Viduthalai Part 2* is the massacre of villagers by the police, which serves as the catalyst for Kumaresan's transformation. This scene highlights the failure of the legal system to protect the marginalized and the necessity of armed resistance in the face of state violence. The film ends on a sombre note, with Kumaresan embracing his new role as a resistance fighter, symbolizing the shift from legal means to direct action.

Vaathiyaar, the leader of the Makkal Padai, plays a crucial role in this transition. His character represents the ideological backbone of the resistance movement, advocating for armed struggle as the only viable means of achieving justice. Vaathiyaar's strategic acumen and unwavering commitment to the cause inspire Kumaresan and the villagers to take up arms against the state. His presence in the film underscores the importance of leadership in resistance movements, showing how individuals can galvanize collective action and challenge oppressive systems.

Armed resistance, as depicted in *Viduthalai,* is a response to the failure of legal and institutional mechanisms to address systemic oppression. This form of resistance is often seen as a last resort, employed when all other avenues for justice have been exhausted. The film raises important questions about the morality and efficacy of armed struggle, while also acknowledging its necessity in certain contexts.

While *Jai Bhim* emphasizes the potential of the law to bring about justice within the existing political framework, *Viduthalai* critiques its limitations and advocates for armed resistance. Both films, however, highlight the importance of resistance as a political act in challenging systemic oppression.

Political Change and the Role of Collective Consciousness

Jai Bhim: Individual Heroism and Collective Action

In *Jai Bhim,* political change is brought about through the combined efforts of Advocate Chandru and Rajakannu's family. While Chandru's legal expertise is crucial, the film also emphasizes the role of collective action in achieving justice. The protests by the Irular community and their unwavering support for Chandru's efforts highlight the importance of solidarity in challenging systemic oppression.

The most inspiring scenes in the film is the final courtroom verdict, where the judge rules in favour of Rajakannu's family. This scene not only signifies a victory for the marginalized but also serves as a call to action for the audience to challenge caste-based discrimination in their own lives. The film underscores the role of collective consciousness in bringing about political change, showing how individual heroism and collective action can intersect to challenge oppressive systems.

Collective consciousness is a powerful force for political change, as it mobilizes communities to challenge systemic oppression and demand justice. In *Jai Bhim*, this is evident in the way the Irular community comes together to support Chandru's legal battle, demonstrating the power of solidarity in the face of adversity

Viduthalai Part 1 and Part 2: The Power of Collective Resistance

In *Viduthalai*, political change is achieved through the collective resistance of the villagers and the resistance fighters. The film portrays the villagers as active participants in their struggle, challenging the state's narrative and fighting for their rights. The final scenes of *Viduthalai Part 2* depict the villagers and resistance fighters coming together to defend their land, symbolizing the power of collective action in the face of oppression.

The scenes in *Viduthalai Part 2* where the villagers' decision to fight back against the police, despite the odds to protect their leader. This scene highlights the transformative power of collective resistance, showing how marginalized communities can challenge systemic oppression and bring about political change. The film underscores the importance of collective consciousness in mobilizing resistance and envisioning a new political order.

Vaathiyaar's leadership is instrumental in fostering this collective consciousness. His ability to unite the villagers and inspire them to fight for their rights is a testament to the power of visionary leadership in resistance movements. Vaathiyaar's character serves as a reminder that political change is not just about challenging oppressive systems but also about building a new collective consciousness that empowers marginalized communities to envision and fight for a better future.

The two films emphasize the importance of collective action in achieving political change, but they differ in their approach. *Jai Bhim* focuses on individual heroism within the framework of the legal system, while *Viduthalai* advocates for collective resistance outside the system. Together, they illustrate the multifaceted nature of resistance and the role of collective consciousness in challenging systemic oppression and envisioning political change.

Conclusion

Jai Bhim and the *Viduthala*i duology offer powerful critiques of political influence in popular culture, showcasing how propaganda perpetuates oppression, how resistance is mobilized, and how political change is achieved. While *Jai Bhim* emphasizes the potential of the law to bring about justice within the existing political framework, *Viduthalai* critiques its limitations and advocates for armed resistance. Both films, however, highlight the importance of collective action and collective consciousness in challenging systemic oppression and envisioning a new political order. Through their compelling narratives and powerful scenes, these films serve as a call to action, urging the audience to question the political structures that perpetuate oppression and to join the struggle for justice and equality.

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HYPERREAL MOTHERHOOD: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF MALAYALAM DIGITAL MATERNAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed the concept of motherhood how it is represented, negotiated and consumed. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have become key arenas where motherhood is performed, validated, and commercialized. This paper critically examines the concept of digital motherhood in Malayalam media platforms through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, analysing how social hierarchies and idealized maternal performances are constructed in online spaces. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital offers a framework for understanding how language, aesthetics, and digital literacy determine maternal visibility and influence in online parenting communities. Certain forms of motherhood are elevated, while others remain marginalized due to their socio-political circumstances such as social status and curated life style. Meanwhile, Baudrillard's hyperreality offers insights into how social media produces a simulated version of motherhood, where the carefully curated images of family life and aspirational parenting blur the line between reality and representation. This hyperreal portrayal creates unattainable maternal ideals, leading to self-surveillance, social exclusion, and the commodification of caregiving. By analysing Malayali-mom influencers, YouTube family vlogs, and Instagram parenting trends, this paper explores the evolving landscape of digital motherhood. It argues that Malayalam digital maternal culture operates at the intersection of social capital, media spectacle, and consumerism, shaping contemporary understandings of motherhood in profound ways.

Keywords: Digital motherhood, social media, hyperreality, mom influencers, cultural capital, digital labour.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of motherhood has been redefined with the rise of social media, it experienced a shift from a private, domestic role to a hyper-visible, performative identity within the digital sphere. Digital platforms brought in new form of maternal representation in Kerala, where cultural narratives of motherhood have been shaped by literature, cinema, and oral traditions. The usage of internet and smartphone has significantly increased, which lead digital motherhood to become a significant cultural phenomenon, allowing mothers to engage with audiences beyond their private circles. Mothers now have to balance the demands of marketability and authenticity, which has both empowered them and raised criticism. While social media changes the role of motherhood into one filled with aspiration and commercialism, mothers' roles are subject to higher pressure in fitting in according to idealized depictions. Social media personalities and parents online need to meet a delicate balance of being able to connect yet present perfection as a means to creating space in which mothers construct both unique and performative mothers' identities. In this research, Malayalam digital motherhood is investigated through hyperreal aesthetics and cultural capital, analysing critically who gets visibility and legitimation in the narratives of motherhood online.

Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality explains how social media creates an illusion of perfect motherhood. The edited version of motherhood on Instagram and YouTube provide a simulated version, where the motherhood is performed, edited, and sold. This hyperreal image erases the complexity of maternal work and substitutes it with an ideal, high-gloss representation of caregiving compliant to platform capitalism. The stratification of digital motherhood along social and economic lines is explained using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Social media privileges individuals with digital proficiency, visual sense, and economic capital, giving visibility to some maternal figures and excluding others.

Digital motherhood can be considered as a kind of performance, where mothers engage in self-surveillance to maintain an aspirational and marketable maternal identity. Digital spaces such as Instagram and YouTube prompt mothers to engage in hyperreal motherhood through the process of intensive parenting, gentle discipline, and stylized domestic interiors modelled after neoliberalism. The trend of "mom influencers" has revived the perception that excellent motherhood equates to aesthetic perfection, emotional work, and consumerism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, images of motherhood in Kerala have been constructed through literature, cinema, and oral culture. Classical Malayalam literature portrayed mothers as self-sacrificing, with unconditional love and devotion. The idealized mother was closely associated with domesticity, family reputation, and traditional caregiving (Pillai).

These images were also perpetuated through popular Malayalam cinema, where motherhood was depicted as an emotionally charged and moralistic experience, with a focus on maternal suffering and sacrifice (Pillai). With the introduction of television and serial narrative in the late 20th century, motherhood stories started to include contemporary aspirations, especially in middle-class families. Women were depicted balancing domestic responsibilities with professional goals, marking a move towards a more nuanced maternal identity (Thresia 217-223). Yet, in spite of this, conventional gender roles were deeply ingrained in Kerala's culture.

The advent of social media has brought about a new era in maternal representation, with mothers playing an active role in creating their own stories. In contrast to previous representations that were mediated by film and literature, digital motherhood enables mothers to represent themselves as caregivers and content producers at the same time, shaping public attitudes towards parenting in real time. This shift fits into Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, whereby online motherhood is not merely a representation of reality but a constructed performance that tends to go beyond everyday experience.

The developments in the field of research on digital motherhood highlights how social media platforms shape maternal identity, often reinforcing idealized and commercialized versions of caregiving. According to Hays, the ideology of intensive mothering, which emphasizes self-sacrifice, emotional labour, and constant engagement, has been amplified by digital media. Social media influencers often curate their content to align with this model, promoting hyperreal portrayals of effortless, joyful, and aesthetically pleasing motherhood (Abidin).

Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality has been widely applied in media studies to analyse how digital platforms construct simulated realities that blur the line between representation and lived experience (Dean). Scholars argue that social media encourages the performance of an idealized maternal identity, where carefully staged images and branding collaborations create an unattainable standard (Duffy and Hund). Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is useful in understanding how social media privileges certain forms of motherhood over others. Research by Banet-Weiser highlights how mothers with access to financial resources, digital literacy, and aesthetic sensibilities are more likely to achieve visibility and influence in the influencer economy.

Furthermore, the work of Gill and Kanai explores how neoliberal feminism has reshaped digital maternal narratives, emphasizing individual success, self-branding, and market participation over collective maternal experiences. This shift has resulted in increased self-surveillance, where mothers are compelled to maintain curated, hyperreal representations of their caregiving labour to remain relevant and financially viable on digital platforms.

Existing literature also highlights the tension between authenticity and commercialization in influencer culture (Banet-Weiser). While some Malayali mom influencers attempt to maintain authenticity by sharing candid moments of motherhood, the commercial nature of their content—through brand endorsements and paid partnerships—often reinforces consumerist ideals. This aligns with research on neoliberal motherhood, which argues that digital mothers are expected to be self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, and market-savvy (Rottenberg).

Furthermore, studies on digital labour indicate that social media influencers engage in extensive emotional and cognitive labour to maintain engagement and visibility (Duffy and Hund). Malayali mom influencers invest significant time in content creation, community interaction, and brand collaborations, often blurring the boundaries between personal life and work. This reflects broader concerns about the commodification of maternal labour in the digital economy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Baudrillard's Hyperreality and Digital Motherhood

Baudrillard contends that in a hyperreal world, representations are truer than reality itself, and thus simulations supplant actual experience. Social media creates a similar dynamic where motherhood is staged, aestheticized, and commodified, so that there appears to be an idealized form of mother.

The hyperreal motherhood presented on YouTube and Instagram commodifies very well edited portraits of idealized parenting—well dressed up kids, neat homes, and emotionally rewarding caregiving moments—along with erasing the day-to-day labour of mothering, fatigue, and intricacies of real maternal work. Influencer culture reinforces this hyperreality by requiring digital mothers to constantly present a version of themselves that conforms to audience expectations and platform aesthetics. The aspirational representation of motherhood encourages self-awareness because moms feel compelled to live up to unrealistic expectations when they contrast their actual circumstances with these well-manicured ideals. Consequently, hyperreal motherhood reinforces consumerist values by transforming maternal labour into branded content and contributing to the monetisation of caregiving.

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital and Social Media Visibility

The concept of "cultural capital" was first used by Bourdieu to characterise how a person's success is influenced by their social standing and financial resources. Cultural capital in the context of digital motherhood can take many different forms, including linguistic skills, aesthetic sensitivities, and digital space competency, which govern online visibility and impact.

Malayali influencer mothers who possess high cultural capital—such as proficiency in English, visually engaging content, and access to high-quality production equipment—are more likely to attract brand collaborations, sponsorship deals, and algorithmic favourability.

Working-class mothers who use vernacular, on the other hand, struggle to become visible since their content differs from that of dominant digital aesthetics. This is a reflection of existing hierarchies offline, in which social and economic advantage influences online success, reinforcing already-present societal inequalities.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach is used in this research so as to analyse the way Malayalam mom influencers build and negotiate their online maternal identities. Qualitative research methods are widely used in media and cultural studies to understand representations, discourses, and audience engagement in digital spaces (Braun and Clarke).

The investigation concentrates largely on content from Instagram and YouTube, as these platforms are primary sites that are used to curate, perform, and market digital motherhood. The study adopts discourse analysis to investigate the construction and negotiation of motherhood on online platforms. The research highlights frequent themes on social media content such as aestheticized motherhood, neoliberal parenting practices, digital labour, and community engagement. Discourse analysis is useful for understanding how language, imagery, and platform-driven structures shape public perceptions and self-representations (Fairclough).

This paper examines how the representation of parenting as idealized is carefully maintained in aligning with aspirational maternal norms. The digital platforms often picture the polished motherhood which include well-structured home environments, conservative childcare approaches, and Montessori-based education. The work also investigates neoliberal forms of parenting discourse, especially in discussions that promote intensive mothering, self-sufficiency, and consumer-led solutions for childcare. Another important area of discourse analysis is the study of digital labour and monetization tactics. Influencers convert their maternal experiences into economic capital through brand collaborations, sponsored posts, and partnerships with baby care and wellness brands (Banet-Weiser). This raises questions about authenticity, as personal motherhood experiences are shaped by commercial interests and audience engagement metrics (Gill and Kanai). Influencers transform their motherhood experiences into economic capital in the form of brand partnerships, sponsored content, and collaborations with baby care and wellness brands. This calls into question authenticity, as individual motherhood experiences are informed by commercial agendas and audience metrics.

The research examines how online mothers engage their followers through Q&A sessions, reels, and community forums. While these activities promote a feeling of belongingness, they are also used to strengthen platform viewability metrics and algorithmic preferability, hence furthering self-surveillance and performativity in digital motherhood.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Hyperreal representation, aspirational caregiving, and self-branding are the major factors influence online motherhood. Aspirational mothers on Instagram and YouTube who conform to mainstream aesthetics—catalogued domestic space, organic child raising, and multilingual accessibility—seem to get more visibility and success. This, however creates a greater burden of pressure on online mothers to present an illusion of perfection, exacerbating self-surveillance and exploitation of labour.

One of the high-profile mom influencers who is a well-known celebrity navigates her dual role as a digital creator mom and celebrity with high views and ratings. Her contents are shaped in a way so as to hold the attention of the audience of any age group. Most digital mothers connect with audiences by chronicling their parenting experiences. Their content typically consists of daily routines, childcare, and family contents which resonate with the platform-influenced taste for edited and photogenic storytelling. Yet their success is also a reflection of Bourdieu's cultural capital, as their capacity to produce high-quality content. Their collaboration with baby care and wellness brands makes them more visible and commercially attractive. The research discovers that algorithmic bias also determines which mothers rise to fame. Aspirational lifestyle content that fits receives more engagement, while unpolished, unrestrained representations of motherhood stay niche or concealed. Content produced in English or mixed with English phrases tends to receive higher engagement, reflecting how digital literacy and cultural capital shape influencer hierarchies (Bishop).

Conversely, vernacular-speaking and lower-middle-class mothers often struggle to gain traction, as their content does not conform to dominant digital aesthetics. Their representations of motherhood—featuring everyday struggles, financial constraints, and raw, unfiltered parenting experiences—often do not receive the same algorithmic favourability, reinforcing platform-driven inequalities (Gill and Kanai). This only serves to reaffirm the identified power structures within Bourdieu's cultural capital, where availability of digital tools and social capital determines one's success in online maternal culture.

CONCLUSION

Hyperreality, cultural capital and platform capitalism are the factors that govern digital motherhood. Even though social media opens up new possibilities of visibility for mothers, it also institutes strict norms favouring specific mother figures while pushing others to the periphery. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality discusses how digital motherhood gets spectacularized, while Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital sheds light on inequalities framing this space. These instances demonstrate that aspirational motherhood is sanctioned while more localized and vernacular stories of mothers remain unable to make it mainstream. In addition to personal influencers, this research highlights algorithmic governance in constructing maternal representation. Algorithmic preferences for material that conforms to neoliberal conceptions of self-reliance and consumerism extend idealized mother performances further. The commodification of care in which individual experience is turned into capital through collaborations with brands and influencer promotion raises essential concerns regarding the fate of maternal authenticity in the era of the internet. Future studies might investigate other alternative maternal narratives pushing back against such pressures, inquiring into the ways vernacular and working-class mothers use digital media in alternative ways that trouble dominant aesthetics and commercial logics. This work adds to debates around digital labour, influencer economies, and maternal identity within online contexts and highlights the demand for more representative and diverse maternal representations within digital culture.

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MULTI-CULTURALIZED DIMENSIONS IN THE WORKS OF CHETAN BHAGAT

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Abstract

Tradition and culture of any nation is pivotal in determining the preferences of the people. Globalization over the period of time has brought many changes across the globe. People tend to change with the western influence yet the traditional impact can never be denied. Chetan Bhagat's works are based on some of the important issues relating to the influence of both the traditional and western cultures. The younger generation sandwiched between the two cultures are strongly influenced by the both and their preferences alter accordingly. This paper analyses the multi-cultural influence and the consequences.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Expectations, Reality, Preferences and Culture

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat's writing provides a sense of positivity. The trust and hope he provides to the readers are commendable. He keeps the stories closer to reality to make the readers think from his perspective. He grabs the opportunities to let people understand the ground reality. As in *Revolution 2020¸* his portrayal of contemporary social and political truth does not go unnoticed. The simplicity with which he narrates is also the reason to have amassed the youngsters towards him. His writing style has paved the path to other emerging readers as well. Contemporary writers Sudeep Nagarkar and Ravinder Singh have taken him as an inspiration. Bhagat's concentration is on the theme and the plot of the novel. The storyline is the protagonist and not the dialect. Simple and easy language keeps the readers glued to his novels. His experiments and experiences are well conveyed through the style of writing adapted by him.

The themes of Chetan Bhagat's novels are dynamic. They revolve around the youth of India. There are many social issues and political turmoil in the country, which have been deterring the development of young Indians. The novelist addresses issues like the basic infringement in the present education system, the necessity to go in search of better prospects, the conditional confinement of younger minds in schools and colleges, the imprisonment of youth in the conventionalism set by the tradition, and so on.

A. Pavani (2015) in the article, "Multiculturalism in Chetan Bhagat's *2 States* posits that the novelist beautifully presents the cross-cultural conventionalism. Through religious undertone and philosophical patterning, the novelist in this work highlights on the facts which are lacking in the modern generation. The episode of Arvind Ashram and Guruji's advice is the reminder to the younger generation to keep up with the pace anything beyond control will lead to chaos. Multiculturalism is good with the acceptance of ideologies of one another from different backgrounds. Mutual respect is necessary to keep things under control. This novel shows different cultural disharmonious situations.

Usha Rani and Manish Yadav (2018) in their work "Analyzing Postmodernism and Multiculturalism in *2 States*" posit that globalization is advancing mono-culturalism in India. It has led to social changes, "it is by all accounts neutralizing assortment and propelling Mono-culturalism" (645). This rresearch article deals with different social issues of the younger generation in India. In addition to the portrayal of problems, there are possible solutions given by the writer and the same are also highlighted by the researchers. The novel gives the vibe of a motion-picture with a roller-coaster emotional ride.

Javaid Tantry Ahmad (2017) in his article "Multiculturalism: Exploring the Inner World of New Technocrats in One Night @ the Call Centre" posits that the young technocrats are caught up in the web of contradictory thoughts. They are unable to stand the pressure and forced to lead a suffocated life. Loss of identity occurs and proving one's mettle becomes impossible for them. The metropolitan culture is discussed by the novelist in the work. Extreme exploitation and its consequences can be seen in their life. The reason to work like slaves is to earn to lead a decent life in the metropolitan society.

2 States is a work depicting cultural clash within India. The autobiographical work is an amalgamation of differences persistent in the Indian society. The two main characters Krish and Ananya Swaminathan are from different backgrounds ethnically but united by the modernity of modern generation. Chetan Bhagat's portrayal of life in India's top-level institutions invite a separate population. Similar to his previous works, this has the background set up in the campus of IIM, Ahmedabad in which the young and brilliant minds celebrate their life.

Krish and Ananya are those who have come with greater dreams and brilliance in academics. The story is a narrative of the love life of the novelist himself. The touch of personal life with realistic conveyance of thought process has made the work a success.

The lines initiating the love story of the leading characters provide the information necessary to lay the platform for cultural clash, "I checked her out from the corner of my eye, wondering what the big fuss about this South Indian girl was." The bifurcation of South and North or East and West has been a standard mark of deviation from the concept of unity in India. Any south Indian in the northern part is identified with the term 'Madrasi'. What makes the people differentiate on terms of ethnicity within the same nation remains a paradigm for other variations.

There are many elements to differentiate the people of different states in India, yet there are certain factors which unite them, especially the older generation. As love has become a common factor uniting the young minds, there are specific beliefs and practices to bring them on common grounds. The expectations of finding a prospective partner from the similar background is what they need, Ananya's parents and aunts are so happy to find a boy from the same background, "He was Tamilian, a Brahmin and an Iyer and those are three separate things, and non-compliance in any can get you disqualified" (*2 States* 122). The prominence given to horospic match is not given to feelings of the young ones. The traditional practises are deemed much importance than the individual desires;

'No. he used to call when she wasn't at home. Anyway, until the nakshatram matches, the boy and the girl are not allowed to talk.'

'That's how it is in our culture,' Manju said, his hands itching to get to his workbook. I gave him back his notes (*2 States* 122).

The diversity in the dressing sense of the people in India with different cultural and ethnic background can be realized as well. Southern part of the country is dominated by different ethnic outfits compared to the northern part. The conventionality is found in the parents of Ananya when they attend the convocation function, "Her father wore a crisp white shirt, like the one in detergent ads. Ananya's mother walked behind in a glittery haze. Her magenta and gold Kanjeevaram sari could be noticed from any corner of the lawn. She looked as if she had fallen into a drum of golden paint." (*2 States* 45) The younger generation is also culturally entwined to norms. On personal front the choices denote the modernity inherent in the youth of the nation, but the kind of satisfaction desired by the parents from their children is often fulfilled by them without much negation. Ananya, who is in love with Krish does not fail from either standing upto the expectations of her parents or following the norms of the family and the culture. Without much denial she follows the instruction of her parents, "She had gone for a bath. She will come after evening prayers." *(2 States* 91) The traditional side of Ananya is a complete shock to Krish, "I was seeing her after two months. She wore a cream-coloured cotton sari with a thin gold border... I wanted to grab her and plant the biggest kiss on her lips ever. Of course, things had to be different with Mr. Hindu-addict Grumpyswami in front of me. *(2 States* 91). The difference can be realised with the introduction of a Punjabi girl, the cousin of Krish; "She wore a wine-red salwar kameez with vertical gold stripes running down it. She was abnormally white, and my mother was right; she did remind me of milk." (*2 States* 62). He learns the culture of her family with continuous visit to her place. He learns the customary practices and expectations of the Tamil Brahmin family.

The novel additionally has added many interesting and different flavors such as the diversified thinking of people. United by the commonalty of Indianness is not sufficient to keep people accept the cultural differences with ease. The protagonist Krish is from a northern state whereas, Ananya is a south Indian by origin. The two in love are united by the emotional bond but their parents are unable to accept the differences. They are manipulative, and exaggerate one's own culture to suppress the other inhumanely. The inter-caste or inter religious marriages in India is suppressed by the hegemonies of the conventional generation. Even to this day honor killing is active in the country. In the midst of such interventions, Krish and Ananya migrate with ease in their love life. They both are aware of the prejudices of their parents;

'C'mon, mine are a bit conservative. But we are their overachieving children, the ultimate middle-class fantasy kids. Why would they have an issue?'

'Because they are parents. From biscuits to brides, if there is anything their children really want, parents have a problem,' I said. (*2 States* 39).

One Night @ the Call Centre by Chetan Bhagat is a novel published in the year 2005, not so remote from the year of the origin of call centres, depicts the harsh truths and hidden factors. Browsing through the novel brings an idea of the duality in the cultural inheritance and adaptation.

Every character portrayed has some reason to choose the job at the call centre for a reason. There is no inner satisfaction and the problems they face are similar.

Like Shyam Vroom is also not happy with either the christening, or the accent training. He is aware of the unchanging truth; that Indianness cannot be replaced by the Americanness and the inherent personality is symbolized by the character of every individual, "'I hate accent training man. You can't teach Delhi people to speak like Americans in a week. 'Just as you can't train Americans to speak with a Punjabi accent,' Vroom said and chuckled. 'Anyway, go train-train, lose your brain'" (ON@CC, 38).

Radhika's life in a traditional Hindu-Indian family is very rough. There is cultural clash between the expectations of the elders and the journey of the younger ones. Radhika is able to change herself to get adapted to the family of her in-laws. She adjusts to cater to their expectations. She has been a modern girl until her marriage, post marriage she even changes to saree, "She wore a plain mustard sari, as saris were all she could wear in her in-laws' house. This was different apparel from the jeans and skirts Radhika preferred before her marriage" (ON@CC, 22) . It is the manifestation of the culture every traditional Indian family feels proud of. Radhika as a member of the modern generation does not find any fault with the cultural pressure, "'They don't make me do anything, Esha. I am willing to follow their culture. All married women in their house do it,' Radhika said" (*ON@CC* 52) .

Sons in any Indian family have an added advantage over the daughters. Despite the negativities the man has, his mother finds the ways to support him. It is rare to find a son supporting his wife, even when the fault is with the mother. These are some traditionally habituated beliefs and practices in India which can never be altered. The same is seen with Anuj and Radhika's life. He is aware of his mother's faults, but blames his own wife;

'Really? Okay.' Esha said and started reading the message: 'Show elder's respect. Act like a daughter-in-law should. Goodnight.'

'What did I do wrong? I was in a hurry, that is all, Radhika mumbled to herself as she took her pill with a sip of water (*ON@CC* 82) .

There are different types of people and different types of expectations. Multi-culturalism is not bad but the acceptance is the need of the hour. Tradition is the core element of Indian society. There are different cultures existing and outwardly they transport unanimity but inward clash cannot be negated. The inherent clash is profoundly portrayed by the novelist in his works. As a writer belonging to the modern Indian society, he is aware of those nuances which add to the divergence and convergence of cultural factors.

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CELEB MOMS: A STUDY OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CELEBRITY MOTHERHOOD IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Celebrity culture has probably been one of the most significant determinants of popular culture in India for long. This paper seeks to study some aspects of celebrity motherhood in contemporary times within the Indian context, with special reference to select Bollywood female stars. It may be argued that motherhood has become a glamorous part of their 'star/celebrity' personality and a daily celebrity spectacle, especially due to the paparazzi culture. Contextualising within the theoretical frameworks of feminist studies and motherhood studies, the paper seeks to study some contemporary aspects of celebrity motherhood like 'new momism', 'mommy-spectacle', 'yummy mummy' phenomenon, celebrity-mother body, mental health issues, etc. with reference to the cases of Aishwarya Rai Bachhan, Kareena Kapoor Khan, Alia Bhatt, Anushka Sharma, and Deepika Padukone; it shall also refer to some lesser celebrities like Chhavi Mittal and Sameera Reddy, whose 'mommy-branding' on Instagram qualifies them as 'celebrity mommy-influencers'. A number of interviews, public appearances captured by media, social media posts by the celeb moms and media reports may be taken into account for the study. The cultural shifts and ideological constructs with regard to celeb moms may be discussed. It tries to address how the celebrity motherhood culture tends to influence the common people since celebrities influence human behaviour. Through a study of fan reactions and public comments on social media platforms, observing the dominant socio-cultural trends, mostly among the urban women, the influence on people and the gaps between the celeb and commoner's world may be understood more closely.

Keywords: celebrity motherhood, new momism, spectacle, media culture

Celebrity culture has been one of the foremost determiners of popular culture in India for a very long time. Feeding on the personal lives, scoops and scandals of movie stars or sports stars and the media increasingly propagating and making business on this, following their fashion and other trends set by them, being lured by products that top stars endorse and the like are the most common elements of celeb culture. But one aspect of this culture that has emerged in contemporary times and become pervasive, impactful and hence socially and culturally important is celebrity motherhood. It may be argued that motherhood has become a glamorous part of their 'star/celebrity' personality and a daily celebrity spectacle, especially due to the paparazzi culture. Contextualising within the theoretical frameworks of feminist studies and motherhood studies, the paper seeks to study some contemporary aspects of celebrity motherhood like 'new momism', 'mommy-spectacle', 'yummy mummy' phenomenon, celebrity-mother body, mental health issues, etc. with reference to the cases of Aishwarya Rai Bachhan, Kareena Kapoor Khan, Alia Bhatt, Anushka Sharma, and Deepika Padukone; it shall also refer to some lesser celebrities like Chhavi Mittal and Sameera Reddy, whose 'mommy-branding' on Instagram qualifies them as 'celebrity mommy-influencers'. A number of interviews, public appearances captured by media, social media posts by the celeb moms and media reports may be taken into account for the study. The cultural shifts and ideological constructs with regard to celeb moms may be discussed. It tries to address how the celebrity motherhood culture tends to influence the common people since celebrities influence human behaviour. Through a study of fan reactions and public comments on social media platforms, observing the dominant socio-cultural trends, mostly among the urban women, the influence on people and the gaps between the celeb and commoner's world may be understood more closely. The paper basically deals with the dual aspect of what it means to be a celeb mom and how celebrity motherhood constructs motherhood discourses in the society at large in the Indian context.

The first argument that this paper seeks to put forth is that, since celebrity is made up of what theorists have called 'spectacle', motherhood has become a very significant celebrity spectacle in recent times. The celebrity, his/her life, body and life events, largely mediated by the media, are all celebrity spectacles to be consumed by the audiences. Whether it is Aishwarya Rai walking the Cannes red carpet with her little daughter Aradhya or Kareena Kapoor Khan glamorously (or glamorously non-glamorous) posing for and/or being captured by the paparazzi as she moves around with her boys (who already are 'internet sensations') and their famous nanny. In fact, the trend of announcing pregnancies in a subtle and aesthetic way through social media is a celebrity trend that adds to the celebrity quotient and attaches the public in a way as if they are a part of the celeb's family and sharing in their joy. Celebrity theories propose that a celebrity becomes a celebrity when the people are interested in their personal lives; their personal lives (as represented by themselves and the media) form a narrative that enhances the celebrity aura.

From the pregnancy announcement to the early stages of mothering, the motherhood narratives, the glam-supermom image, the mommy discourses/culture these glamorous celeb moms construct, and how the people consume it or contribute to it have given rise to a popular celebrity motherhood culture in contemporary India.

Pramod K. Nayar states, "Twentieth-century inaugurated the era of the 'media-spectacle'" (*Seeing Stars* 69); he says that disease, death, scandals and many more such events are "all enacted, available and visible as extravaganzas on screen . . ." (69). Infotainment, extensive media coverage and reportage are all elements that produce a celebrity spectacle. Nayar further elucidates that "spectacle implies something to be seen and an audience to do the seeing... spectacle involves the 'production' of something on screen and its consumption by the audience" (69). It is in this respect that I argue celeb-moms and celebrity motherhood have become a contemporary celebrity spectacle. The wide media/paparazzi coverage of the famous Bollywood female stars moms along with their children and a pervasive presence of the doting mother image; an abundance of interviews where various questions regarding their motherhood journey, mothering experiences and perceptions or mothering philosophies are asked and ornately answered; celebs like Chhavi Mittal carefully curate episodes on various women's motherhood experiences in her Instagram podcasts and others like Sameera Reddy try to keep themselves relevant by posting some sporadic content on family life and life after motherhood or giving advises to new moms (despite not doing films or any substantial acting work)—all these add to the making of a glamorous celebrity spectacle through the image of the celeb-mom who seems to be an all-knowing, fit and glamorous mother. There has been an increasing interest of the media and the people in celebrity mothers and their experiences or ideas of mothering; the image of the 'celeb-moms', especially in the case of the larger-than-life Bollywood stars, as 'powerful mothers' who are independent and glamorous and who, despite their celebritydom, manage motherhood so well, are things that 'enchant' the perceivers, and this 'enchantment' includes the fascination for the judgement of mothers, which is even more rampant in the case of the celeb-moms. Nayar theorises, "Spectacle often dissociates us from everyday life because the screen and the events unfolding upon it enchant us" (69). In the context of celebrity motherhood, this idea may be said to become complicated due to a duality. Motherhood is a feeling, an experience that is somewhat common to all females, whether celebrity or not, and social media or the abundance of interviews and podcasts where the celebs speak a lot on their motherhood; hence, this brings the celebrity very close to the viewers and their "everyday life. But what we see is part representation (even if they are paparazzi moments, they are carefully wrought public appearances) and part imagination because we do not really see them at unguarded moments with their children at home or elsewhere, changing nappies or carrying out other mothering duties, nor can we know all of their feelings and ideas of motherhood/mothering in different contexts/circumstances from interviews or reports because they may still remain carefully curated expressions, at least in part.

How celebrity motherhood has far-fetched impact, influence and implications in a society, especially for mothers (commoners/non-celebrities), is evident from what O'Reilly states in *The Encyclopedia of Motherhood*:

> The popular media is perhaps the most powerful tool for constructing and disseminating ideologies of mothering, which it does most pervasively through both its fawning and critical treatment of celebrity mothers. Celebrities, in turn, are complicit in and resistant of the relentless attention they have been attracting as mothers. Because celebrities have high cultural status, how they are represented as mothers in and by the media has far-reaching implications for how mothers in general are regarded within their respective societies (172).

The above observations are very accurate and applicable in all social contexts. It may be argued that the Bolly-celeb moms sometimes comply with the traditional glorification of motherhood, it being the most satisfying and significant role as a woman; while sometimes they tend to construct evolving discourses of motherhood and mothering. Celebrity theories and sociological observations suggest that celebrity culture has immense impact and is a driving force behind the evolving social cultures. As celebrity motherhood and celeb moms as icons have been strongly impactful in terms of consumer culture, constructing ideologies and discourses around motherhood and a change in the general motherhood culture is evident. "Celebrity mothers have become the gauge by which countless women measure and judge their own maternal identities, skills, and practices" (172). This is part of what celebrity culture theory calls 'star power' which has potential to move the people and effect changes in popular culture.

It may very well be argued that 'celebrity' is a performance; motherhood is a 'performance', and celebrity motherhood is a new form of 'celebrity performance' for the contemporary female Bollywood stars. This idea derives from Butler's concept of 'performativity', specifically 'gender performativity', where she extends Beauvoir's idea "to suggest that 'woman' is something we 'do' rather than something we 'are'" (Salih 10).

Celeb Moms and the media representations of their motherhood in contemporary times are thus a celebrity spectacle and a PR mechanism to a great extent, fodder for the media and a cultural influence on the public. How celeb-mommys or the media representations of celebrity motherhood become a cultural influence is something that I shall discuss gradually. This also comes under the discussion of the idea of 'Star Power'. Glorifying the pervasive visibility of the celeb mom image is a huge and recent shift in the context of celebrity culture in India and the audience perception of the stars. The below statement from *The Encyclopedia of Motherhood* is true for the Western world and also about India but in a slightly different way:

> Celebrities who are also mothers or mothers-to-be have become, since the 1980s and more insistently in the new millennium, a cultural obsession. They are the mainstay of entertainment journalism— which includes print and electronic magazines, tabloid newspapers, TV news shows, and blogs . . . (171).

This could, indeed, have been a rampant phenomenon in the West, while in India, there may have been some news articles mentioning or tabloid magazine photographs of yesteryear movie stars with their children, but this was not as much of a "cultural obsession" as it later became. Indian female movie stars have either taken a long break in their careers, almost disappeared from films or did not garner favour from the celeb mom image. Since the media coverage was not so pervasive or intrusive, nor was there a trend of celebrity PR through social media, nor was the 'pregnancy photoshoot' a mandatory part of celebs becoming parents (especially mothers), their mother-image was not so pervasively visible. It was also strongly believed that this mother image would destroy her career, as she would no longer be fit for youthful and glamorous heroine roles. Few women, though, continued to work, but their public image as mothers or motherhood was not as glorified as it is now. This has also to do with the traditional patriarchal families like the Kapoor family, where, for example, when Neetu Kapoor got married to Rishi Kapoor, she was asked to give up her soaring career in films. It was still quite unexpected that a huge star like Alia Bhatt, at the peak of her career, fame and performance, would embrace motherhood at around twenty-nine years of age; rumour and gossip had it that it could be a pre-marital conception, but this no longer seems to be the age of celebrity scandal on such an issue; what is more crucial to understand is how the star Alia Bhatt, with mostly a youthful (sometimes even childish) and sexualised screen image, would embrace such sudden motherhood at this stage with such ease and grace in the media and in her public/paparazzi appearances. Deepika comes out fit and healthy for public appearances like a concert and a mega fashion show soon after her delivery. These have ignited discussions among many fans and audiences, evident from social media comments or posts, that these celebs have been carrying motherhood with great ease and smartness.

Star Power and the overpowering image of the confident, smart and 'cool', glamorous and managing-it-all celeb mom is the new celebrity motherhood culture that may be noticed in the contemporary times with a bunch of Bolly celeb moms. This, in turn, may be said to influence women in the society, encouraging a similar easy-going attitude towards motherhood and popularising progressive, feminist discourses around mothering, ensuring the well-being of women.

Kareena Kapoor Khan has been appointed the national ambassador of UNICEF for a mission to provide every child in India their fundamental rights. Amidst the crowd of the hyper glamorous pictures on her Instagram, there sparkles a weighty post where Kareena dons a 'UNICEF for every child' T-shirt and a non glamorous look speaking about how Unicef is looking after the basic needs of every child in India. Below her name in this short video, nowhere does one find labels like 'actor' or 'filmstar', but it only mentions her as the 'National Ambassador of UNICEF India' (Kareena Kapoor Khan's *Instagram* Handle). This shows how her large looming public image in the last few years has been that of a 'caring mother', which has surpassed considerations of her as an actor. This is due to excessive media presence with her sons and constantly speaking about motherhood in good light, which qualifies her as the face or ambassador for a children's mission by an organisation like UNICEF. Her 'star power' certainly forms the backbone of such campaigns and ambassadorship; it is a commercial collaboration as well, but the all-engulfing maternal image, blended with the star charisma ('charisma' being another element of celebrity construction), is significant to effect social and cultural change, to stir public sentiment etc. Kareena's speech at the UNICEF event, where she takes up the role of national ambassador, mentions how she now realizes the basic needs of children being a mother to her sons, which, she says, is the most important role in her life now ("Very honoured" ANI News) evidently justifying the UNICEF ambassadorship. A part of what she said, despite her own experiences of mothering, may be PR crafted to enhance the star's maternal narrative.

Deepika Padukone has become an icon for mental health awareness after she openly spoke about her depression story ten years back. That interview undoubtedly brought the issue of mental health to the public forum more strongly, and this has surely had an impact, with many other platforms and commoners taking up this issue seriously.

Deepika has founded "The Live Love Laugh Foundation", which works towards this cause. With this already formed image of a mental wellness patron, Deepika becomes a motherhood icon promoting the mental wellness of new moms coping with maternal guilt, especially for working moms. In her case too, her current status as a new mom, her maternal image (blending with the top star image) is standing taller and striking a chord with the public, and this is evident from her Instagram Bio, which reads as "Feed. Burp. Sleep. Repeat" (Deepika Padukone's *Instagram* Handle).

In an interview with Arianna Huffington for Deepika's TLLL Foundation Lecture Series, where Deepika speaks about motherhood only as part of the conversation rather than the whole, has given rise to so many media reports/articles and viewers' comments on motherhood. It must also be said here that she has spoken about the very contemporary issues that new moms are dealing with, and still people find it difficult to speak freely or accept them and find solutions to those problems. She opened up about feeling stressed, postpartum challenges, being sleep-deprived, burnout, etc. She said that it is absolutely normal and human to feel pain, anger and such extreme emotions (during the new motherhood journey) and learn from it how one deals with the criticism and how one uses it positively by exercising patience ("New Mom Deepika"). Thus, as a popular icon, now a maternal icon, Deepika plays a significant role in the sociocultural spectrum by talking about maternal issues which are traditionally not normalised in patriarchal motherhood; hence, there is mother blaming, mommy guilt, Motherhood becomes a cause of extreme suffering for women, but it is hardly discussed, addressed or considered normal, and therefore women do not get the required support as mothers (especially new moms) and constantly face judgement. Alia Bhatt too has been seen emphasising ideas of 'empowered mothering', like the mental well-being of mothers and doing what keeps her happy as an individual (*Humans of Bombay*). Sameera Reddy, never a big star of Bollywood, is currently a popular 'momfluencer' on Instagram who keeps posting about motherhood experiences, insists on how the new mom should not lose 'herself' post-delivery, being imperfectly perfect, etc. (Sameera Reddy's Instagram). Andrea O' Reilly in her groundbreaking book *Matricentric Feminism,* refers to many critics and theorists and states that the new style of mothering, where one breaks free from the patriarchal mode of mothering, is 'empowered mothering' and an alternative form of mothering which she calls 'feminist mothering', a concept that encapsulates ideas/models of mothering that tend towards framing a separate 'feminism' for mothers. It is a kind of mothering that advocates balance and admonishes guilt, insists that mothers should have a selfhood outside and beyond motherhood, and emphasises maternal autonomy, shared parenting, and more balance (136-137).

Both Kareena's and Deepika's cases are excellent examples of 'mommy-branding', which is a by-product of the celebrity motherhood culture propagated by these celeb moms of Bollywood. The present-day social media platforms are a 'community' building space for the stars; the relatable posts on motherhood, like those on their current status as new moms (Deepika's Instagram Bio reveals that her baby duties are running on a loop), postpartum depression, other maternal emotions and challenges, all bring people closer to these stars. This is again a complex and paradoxical situation where the celebrity feels like just another close friend or fellow mommy on one hand, and on the other, the star status persists – the celebrity is on a pedestal, distant from common people's realities.

Deborah Jermyn has studied the case of Sarah Jessica Parker, who integrated glamour, stardom and motherhood; her motherhood status cemented her status as a star icon; and how celebrity motherhood is positioned in the current social discourses and how audiences negotiate meanings of motherhood as they consume the celebrity. She has also outlined how the 'rise of the "celebrity mom, twinned with the emergence of the "yummy-mummy", has become a key and highly visible preoccupation widely evident across contemporary representations of motherhood' (164). Jermyn's research traces a development of the celebrity culture and social culture nexus that happened in the early years of the millennium decade. This is true in the case of the Bollywood celeb moms, who have integrated glamour and fashion with motherhood, and this has been well accepted by the audiences who may be influenced by it to some extent. This discussion leads to that of the female body, especially the celeb mom body, which is a subject of continuous 'gaze' (deriving from Mulvey's concept) and surveillance/scrutiny, judgement, emulation, and projection of desire. This makes the celeb mom body a complex and conflicted site. The maternal body is traditionally supposed to be venerated in our culture; it is perceived as pristine since it serves as an epitome of something glorified as divine, that is, motherhood. This idea clearly contrasts with the perception of a body as hyper-sexualised to represent glamour, etc.; this is the dichotomy that Jermyn suggests in the case of Parker, which she negotiates so well. In fact, in the case of the Bollywood celeb moms, the glamorisation (even sexualisation in pregnancy photoshoots, 'baby bump' branding, etc.) of the maternal body is what the audiences apparently want. The specific question of the 'male gaze' of this celeb body is subject to separate research with different methodologies. The dichotomy that has been discussed above is profoundly true in the case of the contemporary celeb moms ruling Bollywood. Delving deep into recent history, one can see how celebrity motherhood became a "sensual body performance" (Gupta):

> When actor Demi Moore posed nude and seven months pregnant for the August 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair*, she shattered assumptions that the pregnant body is de-eroticized. From the late 20th century on, celebrities have been routinely categorized by the press as "hot mamas" . . . debunking traditional notions of the mother as angelic and pure. (*Encyclopedia* 173)

This marked the beginning of an era [in the West] where pregnancy, once confined to the private sphere, now became hyper visible in popular culture; many also perceived this as a liberating experience that took away the shame associated with gestating bodies (Gupta).

Motherhood itself, like the feminists have spoken about the woman, can no longer be considered to be limited to a private/domestic sphere; it is very much political, as goes Beauvoir's famous idea that the personal is political. It becomes more public and political when one considers how celebrity culture influences popular culture. This culture, where celebrity (usually Bollywood) pregnancies are glorified and celebrated "through highly curated and glamorous photos of cradled baby bumps", and "celebrities present the pregnant body as a different type of sexy" (Gupta), is setting new standards of beauty that may boomerang as a pressure. It is also true that the "fetishised version of the blissful celebrity pregnancy conceals the harsh realities of the gestating body" (Gupta). Celebrity culture is, after all, based on representation. This culture has not only become a celebrity motherhood trend, but it has also become a mandatory part of the pregnancy journey for the majority of urban upper- and middle-class women/couples in all parts of the world; India is no exception. Certainly, it raises questions about promoting nudity/partial nudity, over-sexualisation of motherhood and reducing it to something that has to do more with the body than with the spirituality it has been associated with in the traditional Indian culture. Or has it worked as a metaphor for the liberation, individuality and empowerment of women embracing motherhood out of 'choice', confidence and redefining womanhood in our culture through motherhood? For example, Richa Chaddha tattooed the symbols of the 'Flower of Life' and the 'Divine Feminine' on her body for her pregnancy photoshoot ("Richa Chadha", *SHOWSHA*). There may be another reading of this phenomenon as reinstating, in the collective imagination, a celebration and glorification of the maternal body that has the exclusive power of reproduction. Could this representation also imply the 'Divine Mother-Goddess' myth lurking beneath, but with a twist of the contemporary glamorous, strong, empowered, and unapologetic woman? It must be understood that all this celebrity packaging is certainly monetisation of motherhood, enhancement of celebrity quotient and PR publicity. The celebrity 'Body', as a celebrated body captivating public gaze, fantasy and imagination, still remains largely different from the commoner's body, and there remains a difference between appearance, representation, public performance through the body and the bodily realities that intersect with the economic, socio-cultural, and class/caste realities that each individual woman (or a section of them) is embedded in. Celebrity culture and the examples of the most popular celebrity women who have long attained the culturally determined age of motherhood have also popularised the concepts of 'egg freezing', late motherhood, the use of assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy (Priyanka Chopra) and adoption (Sushmita Sen). O'Reilly says that feminism argues in favour of women's liberty to choose whether or not to be mothers, at what time of their lives and careers they wish to be mothers, how they want to mother, how many children they want to have or adopt, etc. (*Encyclopedia* 397). Thus, Alia and Kareena becoming mothers at the peak of their careers, or deciding to have more than one baby, or Priyanka having a baby by surrogacy, are all strong moves by contemporary celebrities that form 'feminist' discourses of motherhood, and this is potent enough to impact the popular motherhood culture.

Class is a significant intersecting factor when assessing how celebrity motherhood culture affects popular culture. What position the common women (mostly urban, upper-/middle-class) take regarding how they perceive their own bodies *vis-à-vis* the standards set by celeb mom bodies is a complex phenomenon. That the celeb moms are expected by most people to get back to their pre-pregnancy body shape and size is out of the question. Shilpa Shetty was awarded the title of 'yummy mummy' in 2014 based on a survey taken by pregnant and new mothers in India, on the occasion of Mothers' Day ("Meet Shilpa Shetty"). These ideals of motherhood/mothering have both positive and negative impacts culturally. Shilpa Shetty is also a yoga/fitness icon, and her 'yummy-mummy' image continuously inspires young women/new moms to take care of their body-mind health through fitness regimes and that a certain healthy body type is achievable even post-delivery, which may boost confidence. These body issues give rise to tremendous pressure on the celebs due to surveillance, judgement, trolling and body-shaming. This became serious when Aishwarya faced rampant body-shaming for gaining a lot of weight (which, understandably, was not how people were used to seeing the 'world's most beautiful woman') after giving birth to her daughter Aradhya in 2011.

The idea of 'yummy mummy' signifies the importance of the celeb mom's maternal body, seen as an ultra-glamorised body that is supposed to maintain a certain body type after pregnancy; they gain the disfavour of the audience (often brutally trolled) if they fail to achieve it, or sometimes they display 'signs of ageing'. These celebs embody the body-beauty-youth aspirations of commoners. Such austere

beauty standards and unrealistic expectations and pressures are potent of negatively affecting the mental health of the women concerned, who are, after all, biological and psychosocial beings. These celeb moms often take a strong stance and portray themselves as non-conformant to such set standards, representing themselves as unapologetic and unaffected by such judgements so that they may become more relatable to the people watching them.

Celebrity motherhood today has made use of its potential to influence popular culture. the celebrity motherhood Non-fiction books are potent 'mommy lit' narratives, 'matrifocal' in nature. Yet it is a complex genre where fact and fictionalisation blend into forming the celebrity maternal narratives.

These surely add value to the celebrity status and often help to establish these women as strong feminist mothers. Kareena Kapoor Khan means her book *Kareena Kapoor Khan's Pregnancy Bible* to be "the ultimate manual for moms-to-be", but this is evidently a marketing propaganda utilising her star power, the popularity of her older son Taimur and the consumer-packaging of motherhood. Chhavi Mittal, though not as big a Bollywood star, has been doing some significant work as a 'momfluencer', taking up motherhood/mothering discourses through her podcasts and Instagram posts. Her book *More Than a Mama: A Memoir on Motherhood* could be seen as continuing the trend of 'celeb mom fiction', as motherhood is apparently the most serveable/sellable subject.

Being a celebrity has its own pressures, especially the management of media/paparazzi interaction, image construction and maintenance, mental health issues due to an excessively competitive professional world, their lives being constantly overexposed, facing austere judgement and criticism regularly from a large section of people, and their lives being mostly public; they are likely to feel stressed due to scandals and the balancing of family life and relations. As mothers, these celeb moms face judgements based on the society's expectations of patriarchal motherhood, preconceived notions that celeb moms are not doing intensive mothering due to their different lifestyles. Raising children in these circumstances where the children are constantly in the limelight, with the paparazzi constantly hunting them for pictures, is often one of the most troublesome aspects for the celeb moms, but at times, they themselves become consorts of the paparazzi. According to 'Motherhood Studies', motherhood/mothering entails a lot of stress due to the traditional expectations for a mother to be a 'good mother', to do intensive mothering, to always put her child first and to annihilate or sacrifice herself continually in the process; more heavily demanding expectations are hurled upon working mothers to balance work and child care, and mothers constantly internalise guilt as they feel they are mostly failing in their duties.

The concept of 'New Momism' is something that applies to the case of how motherhood is projected by the stars in many interviews or represented so by the paparazzi/media representations. In addition to this, there is an audience imagination, all of which together create romanticised and impossible standards of motherhood, which is known as 'new momism'. My argument here is that these Bollywood mothers, who are so celebratory and 'vocal' about motherhood, often tend to romanticise even the most difficult experiences of motherhood and mothering. This may be misleading in some parts and may tend to propagate highly romanticised ideas and not allow the viewers to realise the exact excruciating conditions which, in turn, like postpartum depression, work-life balance, juggling their kind of profession (which is very different from those of commoners) and caregiving duties towards young kids, bearing the kids' fuss, etc. It is not unnatural for a doting mother to speak fondly of her child's mischiefs. A fan even commented on "Love the way she cutely gets irritated by her children" in one of the videos of Kareena Kapoor Khan when she answers a question on what her son calls her and their father and mother (*Zoomtv*).   In another interview she mentions how her toddler keeps screaming all day; in a podcast with Jay Shetty, Alia says that being a mother has brought her a lot of peace and delivered her from anxiety, hypertension and depression, despite mentioning a practical realisation that no mothering/parenting can be perfect and that she has many fears about mothering ("Alia Bhatt's Hidden Struggles"). These celeb moms take an ambivalent position as they tend to practice and preach 'empowered' and 'feminist mothering' on one hand, while on the other, they become representations of the traditional glorification of motherhood—the mother who constantly feels joy in her role as a mother, never tired or angry, drawing complete satisfaction as a woman from her child. It is most likely that many people watching is carried away by the tantalising and misleading idea of motherhood they see, as in the world of celebrity mothers, financial stress and physical labour hardly figure; motherhood is presented as "an infinitely more glamorous version of the real thing, selling motherhood as safe, easy, and enjoyable" (Gupta).

Nayar's theorisation, "celebrities represent what people aspire to be or to possess" (68), is applicable in this context. Celebrity-mothers tend to embody these aspirations of the non-celebrity/commoner moms (especially urban) to project their aspirations of a glamorous 'mommyhood', perfect balancing and mothering practices. Social media is paradoxically bringing them close yet removing them very far. Consider the case of Instagram aesthetics, fashion, etc. The popularisation of pregnancy photoshoots,

stage-wise photoshoot trends as the child reaches milestones, and the popularisation of kid merchandise e-commerce and brand endorsements like 'Prega News' products. This has also to do with the consumer culture, as new moms love to follow these trends and become consumers of expensive childcare products or children's merchandise. Anushka Sharma partners with a brand that sells food for kids, and Alia has launched her own clothing/merchandise brand 'Ed-a-Mamma' (for children and pregnant people) even before becoming a mom herself, which bears testimony to Bollywood's current obsession with maternity in terms of consumerism, popularity, etc. Celebrity endorsements earn great profits by impacting consumer choices, and this is the most significant effect of celebrity culture.

The audience imagines and is often made to imagine, due to the romanticisation of mothering done by the stars (also by their PR teams), that motherhood is the best thing that can happen to a woman. For example, stars have associations with the best dieticians and nutritionists; therefore, it may be imagined that the star mothers themselves have a good knowledge base regarding the health and nutrition of kids, which may be an extra privilege in nurturing their children and many more such things. This may even create somewhat false expectations, aspirations and judgements in some people and, thereby, a latent dissatisfaction with oneself at some moments.

'New Momism' entails reference to a set of norms promoted by the media and posits that increasing standards of perfection make it difficult for mothers to either achieve the prescribed ideal or carve a space for individual identity. This creates anxiety, guilt and ambivalence for the motherhood experience (*Encyclopedia* 51). In one of her interviews post-embracing motherhood, Alia Bhatt talks about maintaining balance, saying that it is she who chose to multitask; she chose to be an entrepreneur, producer, actor and a mum, and she has to juggle all the roles without complaining; when she has low energy, a look at her daughter gives her immense energy; she further says that life is tough, unfair, and a bumpy journey, but one has to keep striving; she also goes on to say that women are made to multitask and that she loves the fact that she is a woman and she can do it all. She weaves it into her 'glorify motherhood' narrative of how a look at her daughter energises her even when she has immitigably low energy (*Humans of Bombay*). There can be very different realities for commoners and celebs, and such high philosophical ideas may reinstate traditional patriarchal models of good/perfect mothers, feed abstract and unachievable standards of mothering, etc., and hardly mention the anger and the irritation in real terms, as that could be unacceptable socially and damage their star status. In fact, the maternal image softens the public perception of the celebrity.

It may also be argued that the influence of these contemporary celeb moms has some greatly positive impacts as well. They have been vocal about postpartum depression and the importance of considering the mental health of mothers in our society seriously; their glamorisation of the mommy image and child care; and the visible 'liberation' in their motherhood role. The expression and exercise of 'choice'— all create an impact that career, family and children can be managed together. It is potent in creating a pronatalist attitude in the cultural context in the era of 'childfree by choice'. But do their 'well-crafted' advices become too much? Do they become gods and demigods when they sermonise on motherhood? What socio-cultural impacts these have needs to be probed further.

This paper has analysed how celebrity motherhood and the top celeb moms of Bollywood today have impacted and influenced the popular culture in India. It has tried to weigh the positives and negatives of this celeb-mommy culture. The paper has argued that the celeb-mom has been constructed as the new celebrity spectacle today, with the celebs gaining popularity and monetisation through it. Celebrity motherhood has changed the dynamics between stars and audiences/fans in many ways, both making the nexus intimate and distant at the same time. The Celeb-Mom image has profoundly impacted consumer culture. Celebrity motherhood, as covered by the media, is, after all, a representation, and there is a latent politics of representation which often tends to portray motherhood in traditional terms, thereby muffling a lot of real complex issues. Often these tend to set implausible standards for women which align with the idea of 'new momism'. Contemporary celebrity motherhood has ensured a kind of empowered mothering and influenced a generation of young girls who have gained the confidence to have control over their own bodies and balance professional and other ambitions alongside mommy duties. Though often ambivalent in their positions, it may be strongly argued that these celeb moms promote empowered mothering and have feminist visions of mothering, which can be a catalyst to progressive social change.

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FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM: THE ROLE OF POP CULTURE IN SHAPING DIGITAL CAREERS FOR MARGINALISED GROUPS

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Abstract

The rapid rise of digital platforms like Instagram and YouTube has transformed popular culture into an interactive and participatory space for the marginalised communities. Unlike traditional media, which ostracises the voices of racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, digital platforms empower these creators to build audiences and make profit out of their content. Popular culture paves the way for the unvoiced communities to carve out new career opportunities. This study aims to extend our knowledge of the factors that have leveraged the popularity of marginalised communities and contributed to establishing sustainable careers on digital platforms through the lens of Participatory Culture Theory. The under-represented creators turned social media into a space for both cultural expression and economic mobility through fan engagement and collaborations. However, they are faced with digital labour exploitation that limits their career growth. This paper highlights the impact of pop culture's digital evolution in expanding economic opportunities for marginalised groups. It is further explored by examining platform policies and analysing the case studies of successful marginalised influencers.

Key Words: Popular Culture, Digital Platform, Marginalized Communities, Influencer Economy, Digital Labor Exploitation.

Introduction

The digital age has drastically changed how people interact with and participate in popular culture, offering a unique platform for marginalised voices to be recognised. In contrast to traditional media, which has long been dominated by gatekeeping organisations like major TV networks, publishing companies, and film studios, digital platforms have democratised content creation, enhancing accessibility and inclusivity.

Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and various social media sites have generated fresh opportunities for marginalised groups to create and share content on their own terms. These online environments empower individuals from a wide range of backgrounds—including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled creators, and other historically excluded communities—to overcome traditional obstacles in media fields. By engaging in self-publishing, live streaming, and community-based interaction, these creators can cultivate loyal audiences, generate revenue from their work, and develop sustainable careers in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Apart from economic prospects, digital platforms significantly influence cultural stories and promote social progress. Content creators hailing from under-represented communities utilise these platforms not just for entertainment, but also as effective instruments for advocacy, education, and social justice. By narrating personal experiences, addressing systemic inequities, and participating in grassroots activism, they confront prevailing cultural narratives and offer alternative viewpoints that are frequently absent from mainstream media.

Although digital media can potentially enhance democratic practices, obstacles are still faced in the media, such as algorithmic bias, content moderation guidelines, and the monetisation strategies of platforms. Many creators experience fluctuating visibility due to algorithmic suppression, the demonetisation of sensitive or political content, and ongoing risks of online harassment and digital discrimination. Additionally, the financial sustainability of independent content creation remains uncertain, as inconsistent advertising revenue models and brand partnerships generally favour influencers who conform to conventional marketable standards.

This paper examines the role of digital platforms in reshaping economic and social opportunities for marginalised groups. It explores the ways in which these digital spaces empower creators, the obstacles they continue to face, and the broader implications for media representation and cultural production in the digital age. By analysing both the successes and the limitations of these platforms, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how technology is reshaping power dynamics in the media landscape.

The Democratisation of Media Through Digital Platforms

Traditional media has long shaped cultural narratives while marginalising under-represented communities, including racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Mainstream film studios, publishing houses, and news outlets have historically reinforced societal biases through exclusionary practices, limiting opportunities for diverse creators.

However, digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have disrupted this landscape by allowing individuals to create and distribute content without institutional gatekeeping. This shift has led to greater representation and inclusivity in media, enabling marginalised voices to challenge dominant narratives. Additionally, social movements such as #MeToo and #DisabilityVisibility have gained traction through digital engagement, further advocating for equitable portrayals in mainstream storytelling.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Algorithmic biases, content moderation policies, and online harassment continue to disproportionately impact marginalised creators, often limiting their reach and economic opportunities. Additionally, the commercialisation of digital media raises concerns about authenticity as independent voices navigate corporate partnerships and platform regulations. However, the transition from passive consumption to active participation in media has reshaped cultural discourse, giving creators more control over their narratives and fostering a more inclusive media environment.

Economic Opportunities in the Digital Creator Economy

The rise of digital platforms has created new economic opportunities for content creators, particularly for historically marginalised communities. Unlike traditional media industries, which have been difficult to penetrate, digital platforms enable individuals to monetise their work through multiple revenue streams. These include ad revenue from platforms like YouTube and TikTok, sponsorships with brands seeking authentic influencer endorsements, and direct audience support via crowdfunding services such as Patreon. Additionally, creators generate income through affiliate marketing, merchandise sales, and subscription-based content, allowing them to build sustainable careers while maintaining creative independence.

However, financial stability in the digital creator economy is not guaranteed. Algorithmic changes, fluctuating monetisation policies, and online harassment can hinder a creator's success.

Empowering Underrepresented Communities

Digital platforms have provided unprecedented financial opportunities for marginalised groups, enabling them to build careers outside traditional employment structures. Many LGBTQ+ influencers, Black content creators, and disabled individuals have successfully leveraged platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to generate income, establish personal brands, and expand career opportunities.

• **LGBTQ+ Influencers** – Creators such as Tyler Oakley (YouTube) and Jazz Jennings (Instagram) andDr Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju (Instagram) use digital platforms to share personal experiences, advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, and earn through sponsorships, memberships, and merchandise sales. Many have expanded into businesses, launching makeup lines, writing books, or hosting events.

• **Black Content Creators** – Influencers like Jackie Aina (YouTube) and Tabitha Brown (Instagram) highlight Black culture, beauty, entrepreneurship, and activism. They monetise their content through brand partnerships, product collaborations, and online courses.

• **Disabled Creators** – Figures such as Molly Burke (YouTube), Aaron Philip (Instagram), Dhanya Ravi (Instagram), and Viral Modi (Instagram) use social media to challenge stereotypes and advocate for accessibility. They earn through sponsorships, crowdfunding, and speaking engagements.

While digital platforms offer financial independence, challenges such as algorithmic biases, changing policies, and fluctuating revenue remain. To ensure stability, creators diversify income streams, leveraging multiple monetisation models to sustain long-term success while reshaping media for greater inclusivity.

Challenges faced by Marginalized Content Creators

Although digital platforms provide new opportunities for marginalised creators, they continue to face systemic challenges that limit their visibility, financial growth, and personal safety. These challenges include algorithmic bias, content suppression, income disparities, and online harassment.

Algorithmic Bias: Social media platforms operate on algorithm-driven content distribution systems that determine which posts receive visibility. However, studies suggest that these algorithms often contain biases that negatively impact marginalised communities.

It happens through facial recognition bias and content suppression. The facial recognition bias happens on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, which have been criticised for deprioritising content from darker-skinned individuals, LGBTQ+ creators, and disability advocates. Content suppression happens even when the engagement is high; posts from marginalised voices often do not appear on recommended pages or trending sections. Thus, limiting their reach. In 2020, Black and Brown TikTok creators reported that their content was less likely to appear on the "For You" page compared to white influencers, despite having similar engagement rates. The hashtag #BlackTikTokStrike emerged as a response to the platform's failure to give Black creators due credit for viral trends. Also, many LGBTQ+ YouTubers, including Chase Ross and Ty Turner, have found that their videos discussing gender identity or queer issues were either demonetised or hidden in "restricted mode", limiting visibility.

Content Suppression and Demonisation: Social media platforms claim to support free expression, but content that focuses on social justice issues— especially those related to race, LGBTQ+ rights, and disability advocacy—is often flagged as "controversial" or "not advertiser-friendly**".**

This limits monetisation options, making it difficult for marginalised creators to sustain themselves financially. Automated content moderation systems often flag discussions about racism, trans rights, or disability activism as "political" or "sensitive", making them ineligible for monetisation. LGBTQ+ creators have reported having their videos marked as "adult content" or demonetised despite containing no explicit material. In 2019, LGBTQ+ YouTubers such as Rowan Ellis and Tyler Oakley criticised YouTube for automatically marking LGBTQ+ educational content as inappropriate, reducing ad revenue. Activists like Imani Barbarin, who discusses disability justice, have noticed that their posts receive significantly lower engagement compared to non-disability-related content.

Income Disparities and Pay Gaps: Despite having large followings and high engagement, marginalised influencers often earn significantly less than their white, straight, and able-bodied counterparts. Studies show that Black and Brown influencers earn up to 35% less than white influencers for the same brand collaborations. Unpredictable monetisation policies lead to sudden demonetisation without clear explanations, leading to financial instability. Brand biases have made many companies prefer partnering with influencers who align with traditional beauty and lifestyle standards, sidelining under-represented creators. A pay inequality study of 2021 shows that the MSL Group found Black influencers, despite having comparable engagement rates, earned significantly lower sponsorship rates than white influencers. The South Indian LGBTQ+ creators are being overlooked. For instance, influencers like Trintra Haldar and Thanuja Singam are successful; many other queer creators from non-metropolitan regions of India struggle to secure brand deals due to market biases.

Online Harassment: Marginalis*e*d creators, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled influencers, and women of colour, face disproportionate levels of online harassment, including cyberbullying, hate speech, and exposure of private information. It happens through cyberbullying, like hate speech and personal attacks, which make digital spaces unsafe for marginalised creators. Despite having reporting tools, many social media platforms fail to effectively moderate harassment, allowing abuse to continue unchecked. Dr Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju, a transgender influencer from Karnataka, frequently faces transphobic abuse online, yet platforms fail to take strong action against repeated offenders. Also, the same happened with Kushi Shaikh; India's first transgender model has faced misleading information and violent comments targeting her appearance. However, she has transformed these negative remarks into motivation, evolving from a model into a successful dancer. Studies have shown that Black and Brown women experience more harassment on Twitter, with tweets directed at them being more likely to contain hate speech.

Structural Reforms for an Equitable Digital Landscape

To create a fair and inclusive digital space, social media platforms, brands, and policymakers must introduce structural reforms that eliminate biases, ensure fair compensation, protect creators from harassment, and provide sustainable financial opportunities.

Implementation of fair treatment and algorithm transparency in social media helps the marginalised creators to increase their visibility and prioritise their content. Platforms should conduct independent audits of their recommendation and moderation algorithms. Social media companies must disclose how their algorithms function, allowing creators to understand what impacts their reach. Developers should refine AI systems to eliminate biases that negatively affect under-represented creators.

Despite having similar reach and engagement, marginalised creators are often paid less than their mainstream counterparts. Standardised pay structures can help eliminate these disparities. In 2022, Latina TikTok influencer Victoria Paris exposed how brands offered her significantly less than white influencers with similar follower counts. She used her platform to advocate for pay transparency, prompting some brands to reevaluate their influencer marketing strategies.

Brands should standardise sponsorship rates based on objective factors like engagement and content quality rather than identity-based biases. Companies should disclose influencer pay data to ensure fair compensation across different demographics. Social media platforms must implement fair monetisation policies, ensuring creators are not demonetised without justification.

Marginalised creators experience higher levels of online abuse, including hate speech, cyberbullying, and doxxing. Without proper protections, many are forced to self-censor or leave digital spaces altogether. For instance, Indian journalist and activist Rana Ayyub has been a frequent target of online harassment, including rape and death threats. Despite reporting abusive content, many of her harassers remained active, highlighting the ineffectiveness of platform moderation policies. Stricter penalties should be enforced against users engaging in cyber harassment, including account suspensions and legal actions. Mental health resources and legal assistance should be provided for creators facing severe online threats.

Ad-based revenue and brand deals are often unstable for marginalised creators. Expanding financial support systems can help them sustain their careers. For instance, Indonesian deaf influencer Surya Sahetapy uses crowdfunding platforms like Patreon to fund his work on sign language awareness. Without relying on traditional monetisation methods, he has built a sustainable income stream while promoting disability advocacy. Platforms should integrate crowdfunding tools, allowing creators to receive direct audience support.

More grant programmes and sponsorship initiatives should be developed specifically for under-represented creators. Dedicated creator funds should be introduced to provide financial assistance for Black, LGBTQ+, and disabled influencers.

Conclusion

The integration of marginalised voices into the mainstream through digital platforms represents a profound shift in the global media and economic landscape. Social media and content-sharing platforms have democratised access to audiences, allowing under-represented creators to bypass traditional gatekeepers and establish careers rooted in self-expression and community engagement. However, while these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for economic empowerment, they also introduce new forms of inequality and exploitation that must be addressed.

One of the most significant challenges faced by marginalised digital creators is algorithmic bias, which systematically limits the visibility and monetisation potential of their content. Research has shown that content moderation policies disproportionately flag and suppress posts by Black, LGBTQ+, and disabled creators, further reinforcing the systemic disadvantages they have historically faced. The opaque nature of these algorithms makes it difficult for creators to challenge or navigate these restrictions, placing them in a precarious economic position where their livelihoods are often at the mercy of unpredictable platform policies.

In addition to algorithmic bias, digital labour exploitation remains a critical concern. Unlike traditional employment structures, digital content creation lacks labour protections such as minimum wage guarantees, benefits, or job security. Many marginalised creators find themselves working excessive hours without fair compensation, often earning significantly less than their non-marginalised counterparts despite producing equally engaging or even more culturally impactful content. Payment gaps in brand collaborations, the instability of ad revenue, and the risk of deplatforming further exacerbate economic insecurity.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach involving platform accountability, policy reform, and collective advocacy. Social media companies must implement more transparent and equitable content moderation systems while ensuring that their monetisation models do not perpetuate discrimination. Governments and regulatory bodies should consider introducing labour protections tailored to the gig economy and digital creators to prevent financial exploitation. Furthermore, the role of community-driven initiatives cannot be understated—grassroots efforts, digital unions, and advocacy groups can provide marginalised creators with the resources, support, and bargaining power necessary to demand fair treatment.

As digital culture continues to evolve, it is crucial to recognise the influence of pop culture in shaping economic opportunities for under-represented communities. The rise of social media as a career avenue has already reshaped industries such as entertainment, marketing, and education. However, for this transformation to be truly inclusive and sustainable, structural inequalities within digital labour must be acknowledged and addressed. By fostering a more equitable digital economy—one that values diversity, protects creators' rights, and ensures fair compensation—we can move closer to a future where popular culture is not just a reflection of society but a force for social and economic justice.

In conclusion, while digital platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for marginalised creators, systemic inequities still hinder their full participation and success. Algorithmic biases, content suppression, income disparities, and online harassment create significant obstacles, reinforcing the same exclusionary practices that have historically defined traditional media. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. By implementing structural reforms—ranging from algorithmic transparency and fair pay models to stronger online protections and expanded financial support—digital platforms, brands, and policymakers can work together to create a more just and inclusive digital landscape. True democratisation of media will only be achieved when all creators, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to share their voices, build careers, and shape the cultural narratives of the digital age.

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VIOLENCE IN CINEMA: A SHIFT FROM CONSEQUENCE TO CULTURAL POWER FANTASY

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Abstract

The theme of violence has always been a part of films, but over time, the portrayal of violence in cinema has evolved from a narrative tool used to explore morality and justice to an unchecked power narrative that often disregards consequences. Classic or older films, even when glorifying crime, maintained a moral framework where violent characters faced retribution, be it legal, karmic, or psychological. However, contemporary films frequently depict violent protagonists as untouchable, reinforcing a world where power exists outside law and morality. This shift is not just a cinematic trend, but also a reflection of much broader societal anxieties where people are losing faith in legal systems and are more drawn to stories of individual strength and rebellion. While debates on media influence, often focus on whether violent films incite crime, the question should be, how these films shape audience perceptions of justice, authority, and personal power. This paper aims to uncover whether the dominance of unchecked violence in contemporary cinema is subtly reshaping societal attitudes. Rather than dismissing violent films as trivial entertainment, it is vital to examine their influence in constructing modern ideologies of power, justice, and consequence.

Keywords: Violence, Media influence, Societal anxieties, Moral framework, Cinematic trend

Violence has always been a powerful storytelling tool, shaping some of the most gripping narratives in literature and drama. Back in the late 16th century, Thomas Kyd's *The SpanishTragedy* set the stage for revenge tragedies, weaving a tale of betrayal, murder, and poetic justice, complete with a blood-soaked finale. Shakespeare took this even further, his celebrated play *Hamlet* is filled with duels, madness, and a body count that leaves almost no one standing, while *Macbeth* shows how ambition and guilt can drive a man to ruthless killings.

Back then, theater relied on suggestion, audiences didn't see every act of violence unfold in front of them, but the impact was just as chilling through dialogue, stage effects, and off-stage deaths. As storytelling moved to film, violence became more visual. Early movies, like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), used violence to heighten drama, even as censorship kept it from being too graphic. But the appetite for darker, grittier narratives was growing, setting the stage for what would come next.

Violence in cinema, refers to the depiction of aggressive or harmful acts within films. This can include physical violence (such as fights, shooting, or killings), psychological violence (like intimidation or manipulation), or symbolic violence (which might involve the portrayal of power dynamics or trauma). The way violence is presented can vary widely – sometimes its central to the plot, used for dramatic effect, or as a commentary on societal issues. The portrayal of violence often sparks debates about its impact on audiences, its ethical implication, and its role in storytelling.

In the early days of cinema, violence was mostly implied or stylized, relying on exaggerated physical gestures, slapstick, and melodrama. But during the Pre-Code Hollywood era (1930s), films depicted more explicit violence, particularly in gangster films. But with the implementation of the Hays code, filmmakers were forced to tone things down, and the portrayal of the theme of violence became more restrained and creatively suggested, rather than shown explicitly. When the Hays Code took over in the 1930s, Hollywood had to get creative - film makers had to portray the theme of violence by relying on suggestion, shadowy cinematography and off-screen action. Westerns and war films framed violence as heroic, reinforcing a clear "good vs. evil" narrative. But as the Code lost influence in the late 1960s, filmmakers pushed boundaries, portraying violence in raw, unsettling ways that reflected societal tensions. By the 1980s and beyond, action and horror films embraced violence as spectacle, while directors like Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese used it to explore power, morality, and human nature in increasingly stylized and hyper realistic ways.

Now coming to Indian movies, violence in Indian cinema has transformed over the decades, shifting from symbolic gestures to raw realism. In the silent era, films like *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Savitri* (1950) depicted violence in a stylized, theatrical manner, often tied to mythological and moral narratives. The 1940s and 50s introduced crime films like, *Kismet* (1943), where violence served as a moral lesson rather than a spectacle. The 1970s marked a turning point with the rise of Amitabh Bachchan's "Angry Young Man" in *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Sholay* (1975), portraying violence as a means of justice against corruption and oppression.

The 80s and 90s saw the dominance of masala films like *Tridev* (1989) and *Ghayal* (1990), where over-the-top action sequences and revenge-driven plots glorified heroism.

However, by the 2000s, Indian cinema shifted towards a more grounded portrayal of violence in films like *Satya* (1998), *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), and *Article 15* (2019), using brutality to reflect social realities rather than mere entertainment. From mythological epics to action packed heroism to raw, gritty realism, the way Indian cinema portrays violence has always evolved with the times, reflecting society's struggles, fears, and expectations.

With the rise of modern cinema, especially Post World War II and into the late 20th century, there was a noticeable shift towards using violence as a means of empowerment, particularly in action movies and graphic novels. The increasing presence of antiheroes (characters who operate outside traditional moral codes) reinforced the idea that violence could be used for empowerment rather than as a form of punishment. In contemporary cinema, violence has ceased to be just a narrative tool, it has become the very foundation on which many films are built, often prioritizing spectacle over substance. Whether in Indian or Western films, brutality dominates the screen, dictating not just character arcs but the very essence of storytelling itself. Instead of serving as a means to explore deeper themes, violence frequently becomes the sole driving force, reducing narratives to mere bloodshed and destruction. This is evident in action movies and crime thrillers, where the protagonist uses violence to overcome oppressive systems, protect themselves, or take control of their destiny. For instance, in films like *Die Hard* (1988) or *The Dark Knight* (2008), violence is not just a reaction but becomes a tool for the protagonist to achieve personal goals—whether that's survival, justice, or revenge. These films portray violence as a necessary means to an end, empowering the characters, sometimes to the point of glorification. Another powerful example of this shift is in revenge narratives—films like, *Kill Bill* (2003) or *John Wick* (2014) feature protagonists who take power into their own hands by using violence as a cathartic and self-empowering act. The act of violence, often extreme, becomes a form of self-liberation.

Indian cinema has increasingly made violence its central focus, where the spectacle of brutality often overshadows deeper storytelling. A recent example is *Animal* (2023), which glorifies hyper-masculine aggression, making violence not just a narrative device but the very foundation of the film's appeal. Similarly, *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) transformed generational revenge into a thrilling spectacle, where gore and brutality became the film's identity rather than just a part of its storytelling. A striking example of this shift can be seen in *Marco* (2024), a Malayalam film that presents a protagonist shaped entirely by violence. Rather than being just an element of the plot, violence defines Marco's existence—his actions, motivations, and the world he inhabits. The film doesn't just depict brutality; it thrives on it, portraying his rage and vengeance as both inevitable and justifiable. Like many recent films, *Marco* constructs an entire cinematic experience around aggression, blurring the line between character depth and pure spectacle. This trend, where violence is no longer a consequence but the primary force driving the film, reflects a broader shift in Indian cinema. Rather than using violence to explore deeper psychological or social themes, many films now weaponize it as a selling point. When bloodshed becomes the core of a movie's identity, it risks desensitizing audiences, normalizing brutality as an essential and even desirable element of storytelling.

The argument that violence in films is not the main cause of societal issues, but rather the inefficiency of the judiciary portrayed in movies, offers an interesting perspective. It suggests that the focus should shift from blaming media violence to questioning how the justice system is depicted and its perceived inadequacies. On one hand, films often show a skewed representation of the legal system, where justice is either delayed or not served at all. This can lead to a sense of disillusionment and frustration in society, particularly among those who feel that justice is not being delivered fairly or efficiently in real life. The idea is that when individuals see characters taking matters into their own hands—whether through vigilantism or rebellion against corrupt systems—they might be inspired to act similarly, especially if they lose faith in legal processes. The inefficiency of the judiciary as depicted in films may certainly shape societal attitudes toward crime and justice.

Violence in films has long been a topic of concern for its potential influence on viewers, especially younger audiences. The argument often made is that exposure to graphic violence could lead to desensitization, making individuals more accepting of aggressive behavior in real life. This could, in theory, contribute to a rise in violent crime or antisocial behavior. Another argument posited is that movies often highlight inefficiency, corruption, or the failure of the justice system, leading to frustration and a loss of faith in law and order. Many films depict legal systems that are slow, biased, or unable to provide justice for victims, often leaving characters to seek revenge or take matters into their own hands. The portrayal of a weak or inefficient judicial system in media can reinforce the belief that the system is broken and can't be relied upon to administer justice fairly or swiftly. When audiences see that justice seems unattainable or slow, they may become frustrated with the real legal system.

This frustration can fuel a sense of powerlessness, especially among those who feel marginalized or oppressed by the system. Over time, this dissatisfaction can lead to cynicism and even calls for vigilante justice, a theme frequently explored in films.

In real life, when people believe that the legal system is corrupt or ineffective, they may feel that their only recourse is to take matters into their own hands, leading to a breakdown in law and order. In the absence of a strong, trusted judicial system, crime may escalate as people lose faith in the effectiveness of formal institutions. This is reflected in films where justice is depicted as being elusive, and characters take extreme actions to right perceived wrongs. The portrayal of an ineffective judiciary can also highlight the power dynamics at play within a society. For example, films that expose how wealth, politics, or social status influence the justice system can lead to the belief that justice is only accessible to those with power or resources, further alienating the general public and fueling resentment. This perception can contribute to an environment where individuals feel justified in committing crimes or resorting to extrajudicial actions.

Drishyam, a critically acclaimed Malayalam thriller directed by Jeethu Joseph, tells the story of Georgekutty, a man who covers up a murder committed by his family to protect them from the law. In the movie, he buries the dead body inside a building and meticulously crafts a false alibi to outsmart the police. Using his deep knowledge of films and media, he strategizes the perfect crime. While *Drishyam* is purely a work of fiction, its success reportedly influenced real-life crimes. Two cases in Kerala—one in Wayanad and another in Alappuzha—were labeled as *Drishyam Model Murders*, where the culprits buried the bodies in a manner similar to the movie. In *Drishyam*, the crime is committed in self-defense, and the protagonist is portrayed as a family man trying to protect his loved ones. However, in reality, those who mimicked the crime only took inspiration from the method of murder and the disposal of evidence, stripping away the moral justification that the film provided. The film also raises questions about the efficiency of the judiciary. Its narrative suggests that if one commits a crime and successfully destroys the evidence, they can escape punishment. This perception stems from a lack of public awareness about laws and legal procedures. For instance, *Drishyam* does not mention sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), related to self-defense and sexual violence. According to Section 37 and 38 of BNS, if someone attempts to force or trick a person into sex, and the victim resists—causing injury or even death in the process—they are protected under the right of private defense. The audience is not explicitly warned about the legal consequences of murder or tampering with evidence. filmmakers often prioritize storytelling and artistic expression over legal accuracy, but for viewers unfamiliar with the judiciary, such films can unintentionally serve as blueprints for crime. On the other hand, the Malayalam film *Neru*, also directed by Jeethu Joseph and starring Mohanlal, takes a different approach. It highlights how one can prove their innocence through clear evidence and proper legal procedures. The irony here is that both films share the same director and lead actor, yet their portrayal of crime and justice is vastly different. This contrast proves that a film alone cannot be blamed for inspiring criminal acts.

A more recent case, the *Venjaramoodu murder*, reignited debates on the impact of violent cinema. A 23-year-old man brutally killed five people, including his own family members, by striking their heads with a hammer. In response, the media and politicians were quick to blame recent violent films, accusing them of fueling such crimes. The backlash was so extreme that the director of the movie in question publicly announced he would stop making such films—raising concerns about artistic freedom and censorship. However, this narrative conveniently ignores the deeper causes behind such crimes. Financial struggles, poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse often play a far greater role in pushing individuals toward violence. By shifting the blame onto films, authorities and media figures evade responsibility for addressing the real social issues at hand. Movies, as works of art and fiction, should not be scapegoated for criminal behavior. Instead of restricting creative freedom, efforts should be directed toward improving legal awareness and addressing the socio-economic factors that drive crime.

Keeping aside, the discussions regarding, cinema, gen Z and gen alpha, one must give more attention towards how the youth, lack the knowledge about the judicial system. The news which is spreading nowadays is evoking a sense of fear in the common people, leading them to rethink about their safety. The acts of policemen, either in the movies or in the news where they safeguard the culprits and release them, in the absence of valid proofs have been making people think that it's their own duty to protect themselves. This is the situation, when the movies like Marco hit the box office. Films that portray the heroes, who take over the judiciary in their hands and serve justice to the people on their own, has become the trend setter of this era, which influences not only the youth but the elders as well. Turning distrustful to the Honorable court, people are conditioned to believe that they are the heroes of their own life, who can serve justice to themselves. For instance, there is a scene in the movie *KGF*, where the hero enters the parliament and challenges the whole judicial system.

Parliament being the supreme legislative body of a country is portrayed as a place, where a common man or a citizen can just walk in passing threats. This scene must have made a negative impact on the youthful crowd, by creating a misconception about the legal consequences, while taking such advantages of the judiciary.

Malayalam movies such as, *Jana Gana Mana* and *Queen*, do not hit the 100crs club or become a box office hit, as they staunchly question the inefficiency of the judicial system. Films like, *Marco* and *KGF*, hit the box office, just because the people believe in the hero, who fights against injustice, without the help of the judiciary. The portrayal of such things in the movies must be cut short and should be taken into consideration. Rather than blaming the movies and the media for the increase of crime rates, a clear and evident censorship act should be introduced, especially when showing visuals regarding the judiciary. The censor board, is responsible for giving strict awareness to the audience, considering their age group. Rather than producing films which portray the corrupted policemen and court, filmmakers should try to bring out the safe side of it too. Giving proper legal awareness is another important aspect which is to be taken into consideration. This should be properly enforced in schools and other educational institutions. In the movies, whenever a scene of smoking appears, there will be a warning on the top or the bottom of the screen that, "smoking is injurious to health" And "smoking causes cancer". Similarly, whenever, there is a crime scene, the censor board should be careful enough to warn the audience, not to imitate it and if they do, according to BNS, they will be punished and penalized.

Films, especially those depicting violent acts, may indeed shape societal attitudes, but they are not the primary cause of real-world violence or criminal behavior. The idea that movies directly influence individuals to commit crimes oversimplifies the complex, multifaceted factors that contribute to criminal activity. The factors such as socioeconomic conditions, mental health issues, family dynamics, and access to resources play far more significant roles in determining criminal behavior than media consumption alone. Violent films may influence viewers, particularly vulnerable individuals, it is important to recognize that movies reflect broader cultural trends, rather than creating them. Moreover, the vast majority of individuals who consume media do not engage in criminal behavior. Audiences are generally able to distinguish between fictional portrayals and real-world consequences, suggesting that media violence, while impactful in some instances, is not the sole or even primary driver of crime. Films can be both a reflection of society and a tool for catharsis, offering audiences a safe space to explore complex themes of justice, revenge, and morality without the real-world consequences. While films undeniably have an influence on cultural attitudes and perceptions, the true causes of crime are rooted in societal issues and individual circumstances that go far beyond the screen. It is crucial to understand that while media content can shape views and inspire conversations, it is broader societal factors—not movies—that are the key drivers of crime.

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THE HIDDEN CASE OF VICTIMHOOD IN *INSIDIOUS* (2010)

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Abstract

The current paper tries to understand the representation of women in horror cinema by analysing James Wan's *Insidious* (2010). The paper attempts to highlight the hierarchy of distress characters in a horror film are exposed to and tries to understand the socio-cultural relevance of the systemically high and direct exposure of female characters to cinematic danger. The paper also discusses and creates a distinction between narrative and visual victimhood. It explains how horror cinema victimises female characters through visual torture across narrative frameworks and thus accentuates the perpetual victimhood that female characters in horror are rooted in. Furthermore, the paper also draws attention to how the structuring of female victimhood in horror often necessitates a confinement to the domestic sphere for the characters and represents the insistent cultural practice of disbelieving the female victim.

KEY WORDS: Insidious, horror cinema, horror, gaslight cinema, Cassandra, hysteria feminism, feminist theory.

James Wan's *Insidious* (2010) relates the story of the couple, Renai and Josh, who move into a new house with their two sons, Dalton and Foster, and an infant daughter, Cali. The story takes a dark turn as Renai becomes a witness to paranormal events in the house and as their son, Dalton, falls into a coma.

1.1. Visual Victimhood

Though the horror genre may have a niche audience, it can be said that it undoubtedly has fans who are devoted to the genre. One of the many possible reasons for this is the feelings of thrill and adrenaline rush provided by the film for the spectators. It is not only the spectator, however, who experiences the paranormal incidents of the film; it is also the characters on screen. The aspect that offers the spectator the privilege to enjoy horror films from a distance is the same reason that deprives the characters of horror films. While the spectator can derive entertainment from the assurance of being located distinctly outside of the film's universe, despite the attempts of the theatre's ambience to assimilate the viewer in the storyline, the characters in horror are situated in the location of horror. While the spectator has the advantage of experiencing terror vicariously through the characters, the characters in horror cannot escape the world of horror. Nevertheless, even within the cinematic space of the film, characters are not exposed to paranormal experiences to the same or a similar extent. In *Insidious*, though the victim of possession is Renai and Josh's twelve-year-old son, Dalton, the spectator arguably achieves a sense of thrill mostly from the experiences of horror that Renai is subjected to.

After moving to a new house, Renai first observes inconsistencies around her when she notices the books she had placed on the bookshelf spread out on the floor, when a lamp mysteriously lights up by itself while she is alone in the attic, and when her box of sheet music, which was previously nowhere to be found, though she remembered having brought it to the new house, magically appears in the attic. Nonetheless, the incidents soon exacerbate. One day, as she is playing the piano, she hears a man threatening someone from the baby monitor placed in Cali's room. As the man grows more aggressive, Cali erupts into tears. Panicked, Renai runs upstairs to find Cali crying in her cradle with no one else in the room. In another instance, Renai rushes to Cali's room once again as soon as she hears her start crying; Renai sees a strange man quietly standing behind the curtains. She shouts for Josh, but by the time he arrives, the man disappears. In another instance, Renai wakes up from a nightmare to discover a man pacing outside of her window. As she screams for Josh, the man notices her, enters the room through the closed windows, and reaches out to attack her, shrieking. In yet another scene, which is one of the longest containing a paranormal sighting preceding the explanation of the unusual occurrences, Renai is seen walking through her new house after convincing Josh to leave the previously inhabited house, following the terrorising incidents. The camera follows Renai as she walks through a passage, steps into Foster's room, collects the food crumbs off the bed, places them back on the abandoned plate on the bed and walks out of the room. The scene is likely one of the most frightening, not only due to its length but also because of its introduction of the non-human entity. As Renai walks out and goes to collect the trash from the kitchen, the spectator can locate the back of a boy wearing a coat and a beret right next to the coat rack at the corner of the screen – the camera keeps the entity completely out of focus and moves from it as Renai passes the location unwittingly. The shot quickly informs the audience of the horror that Renai is about to meet with. Renai dumps the trash in a dustbin outside, and as she looks into her house through a window, she catches sight of the same boy, still visible only from the back, dancing to a record playing in the room. Horrified, she tries to gaze at the boy through another window, but the boy seems to have disappeared.

Renai runs back into the home and inspects the room where she saw him. Immediately, the door she ran through shuts by itself. As she walks over to the door, the boy runs past her through the passage. She runs after him and watches him enter Foster's room.

She follows him into the room and closes the door behind her. Just as she thinks she has lost sight of the boy, she notices a movement in the rocking horse, partially covered by the door. She pulls the door towards her to reveal an unoccupied rocking horse. As she grabs the rocking horse to make it stop, the closed door of the room opens up with a thud. Renai walks out and enters Dalton's room to investigate further. She feels relief as she sees Dalton peacefully asleep but instantly notices a pair of shoes sticking out from the base of the cabinet concealed by a curtain. As she approaches the shoes with a golf stick and pushes the curtain away to discover nothing significant, the top of the cabinet opens up and the boy jumps out giggling, making Renai jump back in horror. The scene lasts for four minutes and ends with her curled up and sobbing on the floor.

Insidious appropriately portrays the inequality present in cinema's act of exposing characters to threatening circumstances. The film reveals that Dalton is an astral projector who can traverse a world of the dead referred to as 'the Further' in the film when he falls asleep. Due to this, his soul has been distanced from his body – which has become an object of desire for the departed to possess. Elise, the psychic, who finally identifies Dalton's truth for the worried parents, also informs Josh that the only way to save Dalton is for Josh to navigate the Further and bring Dalton's soul back to his body, as Josh has the same talent of astral projection that he unknowingly passed on to his son. Therefore, it is the body of the boy that becomes the site for demonic struggle, and it is Josh who must witness the realm of the dead and operate in it – making up for his absence in all the earlier direct interactions with the demons. However, the existence of Dalton's body as a potential site for possession is limited to the narrative structure and does not mandate visualisation. An apt comparison can be drawn here between Dalton and Regan, the twelve-year-old girl from *The Exorcist* (1973), whose body also becomes a site for demonic possession. However, unlike Regan, Dalton's body does not experience the violent physical contortions and deviations that mark Regan's body from the time of her possession. Moreover, Dalton's appearance in the film is minimal, and he remains absent from the screen for a majority of the time as a result of him being in a comatose state, unlike Regan, whose corporeality is the perennial site for the cinematic conflict. On the other hand, though Josh undergoes the ordeal of entering a realm of the deceased and even interacting with them to reach Dalton's soul, his direct struggle with the paranormal is limited to a singular scene.

Figure 1. Still from *Insidious* (00:43:39).

As the film uses two realms where the characters can navigate: the human world and the Further, it is also important to note that all of Renai's interactions with the demons take place in the human world. All the occurrences are sudden and catch the unsuspecting spectator off-guard. Contrarily, during Josh's endeavour to save Dalton, the spectator is prepared for the horror that is imminent. Josh, too, is aware of being in proximity to potentially harmful demons unlike Renai. As a result, it can be suggested that the film's principal source of horror is not the interactions of Josh with the demons but those of Renai. This suggests that the primary victim of *Insidious* is not Dalton, or even Josh, but Renai. The argument can be consolidated by understanding the reactions of the characters to their encounters with evil. As mentioned, Dalton remains narratively unavailable to respond to the potential threat of having his body become possessed for most of the film due to being comatose. On the other hand, while Josh refuses to suspect paranormal danger for the first half of the film, upon the realisation of the truth, Josh seems determined and resolved to bring his son back from the Further. However, in all of Renai's interactions with the demons, she is observed screaming, yelling, crying, or cowering in fear. Visually, it is Renai's response to witnessing the existence of the supernatural that positions her closer to victimhood than the other two characters.

Renai being the victim of *Insidious*, though the film's plot does not necessitate her haunting, is an example of horror cinema's preference for women as channels for conveying horror by graphically distressing, torturing, and exploting the female or feminine body.

Other examples of this phenomenon include the quintessential monstrous female figure as seen in *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Ring* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004), *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), *The Woman in Black* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), *Mama* (2013), *Veronica* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), *Raaz* (2002), *Bhoot* (2003), *1920* (2008), *Ek ThiDaayan* (2013), *Pari* (2018), and *Stree* (2018)[1]. Or the plethora of female characters who are traumatised and brutalised in slasher films. Major examples of this can be seen in the *Halloween* Franchise, the *Scream* Franchise, The *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* Franchise and *Black Christmas* (1974).

If Renai's body is not at risk of being possessed like Dalton's or if she is not the narrative rescuer of the boy in jeopardy, the persistent haunting experienced by Renai is largely redundant and inconsequential to the plot. In other words, the imposition of victimhood on Renai seems to be a conscious choice of the film. Renai's victimisation is not narrative, but visual. Though it is not a narrative compulsion to construct a victim out of Renai, the film orchestrates cinematic situations that make Renai's supernatural experiences mandatory. Thus, Renai is not a narrative but a cinematic or visual victim. Victimisation in horror, therefore, is not necessarily created from being the body that sparks horror, like in the case of paranormal horror, or the body that is injured to eroticise violence, as often seen in slasher films, but also from the body that is unavoidably and needlessly thrown in the path of danger. As a result, subjugation in horror can also be understood through a study of the characters that are exposed to and feel the greatest impact of the cinematic threat. Referring to the dichotomy of the spectator and character that the paper opens with, it can be said that the position of the character whose exposure to horror is certain and inevitable, is held by Renai. This assertion can be made not only because she is the dichotomous opposite of the spectator but also because her gender ensures her susceptibility to being exposed to the paranormal. In other words, if a character in horror is different from the spectator due to the prior's inexorable engagement with the paranormal that grants them comparative marginality, the female character exists in double marginalisation, giving the intersectional term a new value in the world of horror. While all the characters in the film might encounter a risk of the paranormal, the status of being a victim is strictly reserved for the woman.

1.2. Confinement to the Domestic Sphere

One of the first scenes from *Insidious* depicts Renai frustrated over an administrative phone call as she attempts to serve breakfast to the children. She fetches a bowl for Foster when he asks for it, only for him to complain about its size. The scene portrays Dalton and Foster prepared for breakfast as Cali cries in the background, all the while Renai struggles to get through to the person on the other end of the line. The scene cuts to Josh preparing himself for work as he comments on a white hair he finds on his head before ripping it off. As Josh walks into the kitchen, Renai, with a kitchen cloth over her shoulder, tightens Josh's tie for him. Renai asks Josh if he is going to drop off the boys to school or pick them up. He refuses, explaining he has a busy day at work. Later in the day, Renai, who has taken time off to work on her music career, is seen playing the piano and composing a song. However, she is soon interrupted by the sound of Cali crying. In a later scene, she explains to Josh, "I was trying to do some work today and then Cali woke after a half hour, and she wouldn't go back down, and I just didn't get anything done" (*Insidious* 00:16:42-00:16:53).

Insidious contains many scenes throughout the film that delineate Renai engaging in household chores while Josh remains missing from the house which is the primary scene of the haunting. After discovering a bloody handprint on Dalton's bed sheet, she tells Josh, "Ineed you. But you're never here" (*Insidious* 00:35:01) after Josh makes up excuses for working late.

Figure 2. Still from *Insidious* (00:08:01).

As it has been established that Renai is the predominant victim of *Insidious*, it can be asserted that the film necessitates her perpetual positioning within the space of the haunting: the inhabited house. Thus, demonic access to Renai becomes possible and convenient due to the fact of her spending most of her time at home.

Similarly, Josh is spared from the initial paranormal trauma Renai struggles with because of the opportunity available to him to exit the space of the haunting by leaving for work as well as intentionally working late to avoid the site of the supernatural. By constructing Renai as a victim, not only does *Insidious* essentialise her role as a homemaker but also justifies it. The only way in which Renai can be terrorised is from her constant placement in the house where the supernatural lurks. Subsequently, it can be said that *Insidious* restricts the woman to the domestic sphere in order to make her an ideal victim of the cinematic hauntings. It is her occupation with the chores of the house, the nursing of Dalton and the raising of the other kids that subjects her to the maleficence of the demons. Other examples of gendered hauntings can also be seen in the case of Annabel from *Mama* (2013), Sanjana from *Raaz* (2002), Lisa from *1920* (2008), and Swati from *Bhoot* (2003). In each of the examples, the female protagonist suffers paranormal violence because of being restricted to the domestic sphere while her male partner receives the opportunity to be outside the haunted house. If this depiction is not understood as a secluded form of representation that occurs in a few films but as an over-employed trope across horror cinema, it cannot be denied that horror films that follow this traditional storyline must reiterate conventional gender roles for the couple. The horror genre, therefore, becomes a repository of patriarchal undertones.

1.3. Disbelief of the Female Victim

One thread that runs common across two aforementioned films, *The Exorcist* and *Halloween*, is that of disbelief. When young Regan tries to share her paranormal experiences with her mother, she instinctively attributes her complaints to the tendencies of an imaginative mind. In *Halloween*, when Laurie expresses her concerns about thinking as if she is being followed by someone, her friends simply dismiss all her worries and claims. The question to raise here is: how much of the plot would have developed if the characters had believed the victims in the first place? Horror cinema, whether paranormal or slasher, often relies on specific conventions to construct a plot. One of these traditions is the systemic practice across horror cinema to disbelieve women.

There seems to exist a peculiar kind of cinema within the horror genre that can be referred to as 'gaslight films.' These films can be supernatural by genre and may or may not involve the possession of a female body. The element of essentialism that they do involve, however, is a woman, typically one who is central to the plot, and who experiences and reports paranormal incidents only to have her accounts dismissed or ridiculed by the other characters. It is the factor of disbelieving her that promises the deterioration of the paranormal situation – thereby, furthering the plot.

After discovering a handprint of blood on Dalton's bed sheet, Renai accuses Josh of staying until late at work – a charge he conveniently deflects using Dalton's medical bills as an excuse for working overtime. Renai confesses:

"I'm scared. I'm so scared and...You don't understand. I'm scared for Dalton. I'm

scared of this house. There's something wrong with this place. I'm not imagining it. I

can feel it. It's like a sickness. Ever since we've moved in, everything's just gone

wrong." (*Insidious* 00:34:11-00:34:40)

It is the cinematic or visual victimhood and confinement to the domestic space that ascertain Renai's exposure to knowledge that Josh possesses the privilege to discredit. Josh's initial absence from the space of horror secures his physical safety but also allows him to doubt the experiences of Renai. When Josh disbelievingly asks Renai if she thinks the house is haunted, she says, "I don't think it. I know it" (*Insidious* 00:34:47). After Renai is attacked by a demon, she begs Josh, "Don't you dare not believe me. Please. Please, believe me. I swear he was right there" (Insidious 00:37:59-00:38:06). Though Josh agrees to move houses for Renai, he continues to distrust the claims of her encounters with the supernatural. Later in the film, he tells her, "You want to believe. Anybody would" (*Insidious* 00:38:48) to which Renai, heartbroken, exclaims, "You don't believe me! You don't believe me!" (*Insidious* 00:58:50-00:58:53) before sinking into the couch and crying with her face in her hands.

It can be suggested that the persistence of horror, chaos, and disorder for the Lambert family can be majorly attributed to the disbelieving or gaslighting husband.

Merriam-Webster defines gaslighting as, "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator" ("Gaslighting"). The definition is crucial for the present analysis as it identifies the individual who gaslights another as the perpetrator. Since gaslighting involves intentional manipulation, the disbelieving husband must be separated from the husband who gaslights. However, in horror, the line between the two becomes thin as both the situations lead to the same or similar consequences. If it is the malevolence of the husband who gaslights his intimate female partner despite being privy to the paranormal truth, it is also the complicity of the disbelieving male partner that ensures the suffering of the woman in horror. From this perspective, *Insidious'* Josh can be considered responsible for the trauma of the Lambert family. It is his reluctance to believe Renai's encounters, disregard her entreaties of taking her complaints seriously and his initial decision to insult and send away the paranormal experts who become the key in the salvation of Dalton, that exacerbates the peril of the family.

Cheung, speaking of the theme of sexist disbelief that remains an undertone in horror, writes, "There's something uniquely blood-curdling about knowing, perhaps viscerally feeling in your bones, that something is wrong and not being believed" ("Sexist Disbelief"). Though the spectator feels grief for the deteriorating condition of Dalton, a meticulous spectator cannot discount the harrowing experience of watching the reality presented to them, through the character of Renai, being ridiculed and discarded by Josh.

The woman in horror whose experiences are diminished by other characters, typically men, can also be seen through the metaphor of Cassandra. Daughter of king Priam and Hecuba, Cassandra was a princess of Troy in Greek mythology. The most popular version of her story suggests that she became the object of Apollo's affection who endowed her with the gift of prophecy. However, as a result of rejecting his advances, Apollo cursed her. Though Cassandra was left with her gift of prophecy, the curse placed on her involved her accurate prophecies and warnings to be disbelieved and invalidated by others – a practice that accrued fatality upon disbelievers. The term 'Cassandra Complex' has been in use since 1949. In Psychology, the term is used to refer to individuals who experience emotional or physical distress due to their personal perceptions and are disbelieved when they endeavour to share their accounts with others (Banford). From this point of view, Renai, or women in gaslight films, can be viewed as extensions of Cassandra – women who are fated to be exposed to the reality of events without ever experiencing the privilege of being believed. Moreover, the figure of Cassandra also highlights a legacy of female disbelief in culture. Examples of women in horror being disbelieved or dismissed by their intimate male partners are *Gaslight* (1944), from where the term originates, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Mother!* (2017), *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Annabelle* (2014), *Orphan* (2009), *Hereditary* (2018), *Watcher* (2022), *Aftermath* (2021), *Things Heard & Seen* (2021) as well as the popular television shows *American Horror Story* (2011) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018).

Moreover, the common disbelief around the confessions of women can be associated with the idea of hysteria. Hysteria is recognised as a condition that centres on "emotional excess" ("Hysteria"). Etymologically, the term is grounded in female biology and is related to the Latin 'hystericus' and Greek 'hysterikos' – terms that refer to the womb ("Hysteria"). As a result, hysteria has always been perceived and approached as a condition that is exclusive to women. The concept of hysteria, therefore, makes women susceptible to be deemed as emotionally unstable or untrustworthy because of their 'emotional excess'. Moreover, popular culture is rife with examples of the adjective 'hysteric' being hurled at women who are disbelieved by their male counterparts. Hysteria is often used as a label to trivialise women's experiences and discount their narratives. Tangentially, it is imperative to note that the systemic practice of disbelieving women does not exist individually in the world of horror cinema but has historically proved to be a societal habit – a custom that harms all female victims of sexual violence in the contemporary society, despite the staggering evidence to support their claims.

In conclusion, it can be said that horror cinema uses a wide range of patriarchal tropes to support itself. Studying Renai's character from *Insidious* allows one to question the representation of women in horror and accentuate the quantity of exposure to terror that female characters in the horror genre are subjected to. Furthermore, comprehending the physical, narrative, and visual positions of characters in horror cinema can prove immensely insightful in feminist studies as well as film studies. These distinctions also help the viewer to recognise patterns and understand the societal and cultural connotations of female representation in horror. Lastly, there is also an urgency to problematise the genre-specific representative habits of horror of torturing women, restricting their movement to the domestic space, and creating 'hysteric' women, which can have dangerous implications for women across the world.

Notes

[1] I have explored this idea in depth in a research article titled "Female Monstrosity, Body and The Exorcist (1973)".

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STAGING IDENTITY: FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE, CULTURAL HYBRIDITY, AND GLOBAL MEMORY

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Abstract:

"Do you regard yourself as a man or a woman?" This haunting question, directed at Cheng Dieyi, encapsulates the fractures of identity, tradition, and ideology in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Chen Kaige's film follows Dieyi, a Peking Opera performer trained to embody the Concubine Yu Ji, and Duan Xiaolou, his rigidly traditional stage partner. Their fates unfold alongside China's political upheavals, reflecting the instability of cultural memory and artistic survival. While the film has been analysed through queer theory and national allegory, little attention has been given to its role as a site of cultural hybridity and transnational cinematic memory. This paper explores how *Farewell My Concubine* negotiates between traditional Peking Opera aesthetics, Maoist ideology, and global cinematic storytelling, positioning itself within Homi Bhabha's Third Space. By reconfiguring local cultural expressions for global consumption, the film raises questions of authenticity, commodification, and the Western gaze. As popular culture continuously evolves, balancing cultural homogenisation and pluralism, this study examines how *Farewell My Concubine* functions as both a preserver and interpreter of cultural identity. Aligning with the conference's engagement with popular culture's societal transformations, this research offers a fresh perspective on cinema as an agent of both preservation and ideological contestation in an era of global interconnectedness.

Keywords: *Farewell My Concubine*, Cultural hybridity, Transnational cinema, Third Space, Cultural memory.

Introduction

In the final decades of the twentieth century, Chinese cinema asserted its presence on the global stage with unprecedented force, propelled by films that balanced national heritage with international appeal. Among these, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) stands as a landmark achievement, earning the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes and securing its place as one of the most internationally recognised works of Chinese cinema. At its core, the film entwines the ancient art of Peking Opera with the shifting ideological landscapes of modern China, presenting a story that unfolds across five tumultuous decades, from the warlord-dominated 1920s to the Cultural Revolution's fervent upheaval. Through the intertwined lives of Cheng Dieyi (portrayed by Leslie Cheung) and Duan Xiaolou (portrayed by Zhang Fengyi), two opera performers whose fates are inextricably linked to their art, the film interrogates the relationship between tradition, political transformation, and personal identity. Peking Opera, a performance tradition dating back to the late Qing Dynasty, synthesises music, mime, dance, and acrobatics into a highly stylised theatrical form. The practice of male actors performing female roles (dan) is central to its aesthetic and ideological framework, reinforcing the fluidity of identity within a rigidly codified tradition. This convention assumes critical significance in *Farewell My Concubine*, where Cheng Dieyi, trained to embody the role of the concubine Yu Ji, struggles to distinguish self from performance. Yet, beyond its function as a historical drama or a meditation on gendered identity, the film operates within a larger cultural negotiation, one that extends beyond national allegory to engage with the tensions between authenticity and global reception.

While existing scholarship has predominantly analysed *Farewell My Concubine* through the lenses of queer theory and national trauma, these perspectives often neglect the film's position within global cinematic discourse and its status as a hybrid cultural text. The interplay between Peking Opera's ritualised aesthetics, Maoist ideological imperatives, and the stylistic conventions of transnational art cinema situates the film in what Homi Bhabha conceptualises as the 'Third Space', a site of cultural hybridity where binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, are destabilised. Similarly, Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity is a process of 'becoming' rather than 'being' offers a productive framework for understanding how the film both preserves and reconfigures Chinese cultural memory for an international audience. By foregrounding *Farewell My Concubine* as a site of cultural hybridity, this study reorients the discussion beyond national tragedy and individual identity crises, examining how the film negotiates between historical authenticity and global marketability.

In doing so, it interrogates cinema's dual role as both a preserver and an interpreter of cultural identity within an era of accelerating globalisation.

Through this analysis, the film emerges not only as a cinematic artefact of Chinese heritage but as a dynamic participant in the ongoing discourse on cultural survival, transnational storytelling, and ideological contestation.

Peking Opera as Cultural Artifact and Cinematic Transformation

Peking Opera, entrenched since the Qing Dynasty, fuses intricate gestures, elaborate costumes, and stylised vocals into a revered art form, historically preserving cultural narratives through rigid conventions (Clark 45). Its codified structure, reliant on traditional character archetypes (*sheng, dan, jing,* and *chou*), symbolic movement, and heightened vocal intonations, constructs a uniquely Chinese performative language. Rooted in Confucian aesthetics, Peking Opera extends beyond entertainment, functioning as a medium for moral instruction and cultural continuity. However, as China underwent political and social upheavals, the opera form itself faced reinvention, oscillating between artistic preservation and state-mandated reform. Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) transcends mere historical documentation by embedding Peking Opera within the transnational framework of global cinema. The film does not simply reconstruct the theatrical tradition but reconfigures it through cinematic techniques that blend realism and stylisation, constructing a layered text that operates both as historical testimony and aesthetic intervention. This reconfiguration negotiates the tension between preservation and reinvention, aligning with Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, where cultural signifiers intersect to forge new meanings (Bhabha 55). The opera's cinematic translation ensures its continued relevance, not by rigidly adhering to its conventions but by adapting them into a form that resonates with global spectators. The mise-en-scène of *Farewell My Concubine*, marked by opulent sets, meticulously choreographed performances, and an emphasis on the interplay between theatrical illusion and reality, reinforces this hybridity. Through filmic language, Peking Opera is both sustained and transformed, its aesthetic intricacies rendered legible to audiences beyond its native cultural sphere.

"I am only the fake king of Chu, you really are Yu Fei" (Kaige 21:02). This dialogue said by Duan Xiaoluo emphasises that, at the heart of this transformation lies Cheng Dieyi, whose identity is intricately staged through his lifelong immersion in the *dan* role of Concubine Yu Ji (Yu Fei, 'Fei' translates to Concubine). Unlike his counterpart Duan Xiaolou, who regards opera as a profession, Dieyi embodies his art to the point of existential entanglement. Trained to embody Yu Ji's tragic devotion, Dieyi's selfhood dissolves into his performance, illustrating what Bhabha conceptualises as the disruption of fixed identities in favour of fluid subjectivities (58). This blurring between performance and self is not merely an individual psychological crisis but a broader commentary on cultural identity in flux. Dieyi's tragedy is not simply his unreciprocated love for Xiaolou but the impossibility of sustaining his identity outside the structured world of opera. His repeated insistence that "a lifetime, a day, a moment" all collapse into the act of performance underscores the film's central meditation on the inextricability of art and existence. However, this cinematic staging extends beyond the national context. Dieyi's identity, shaped and sustained through performance, is ultimately rendered a global spectacle through the film's arthouse aesthetic. While previous scholarly discourses have frequently framed the film through allegorical or queer readings, they often overlook how *Farewell My Concubine* positions Peking Opera within transnational memory. The film, much like the opera within it, becomes a performance of survival, both preserving heritage and reinterpreting it within the larger circuits of global cinema. It does not merely mourn the loss of cultural authenticity; instead, it interrogates how tradition itself is an evolving construct, continuously shaped by historical contingencies and global forces. Through its cinematic adaptation of Peking Opera, the film resists static interpretations, instead offering a fluid and layered meditation on the intersections of art, identity, and historical change.

Political Ideology and the Refashioning of Tradition

The historical trajectory depicted in *Farewell My Concubine* traverses pivotal moments in China's modern history: the Warlord Era of 1924, the eve of Japan's invasion in 1937, the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Nationalist Army's retaking of Beijing, the Communist victory in 1949, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. This sweeping historical backdrop is not merely a setting but an active force that shapes and reshapes the film's central artistic form: Peking Opera. Each epoch exerts a distinct ideological force upon the opera, revealing how artistic expression is not only embedded in history but is also manipulated by political currents. The plays performed within the film, including *Farewell My Concubine, The Peony Pavilion, The Drunken Concubine, Dreaming of the World Outside the Nunnery,* and *Fleeing by the Night*, function as metatextual elements, reflecting the instability of both artistic tradition and individual identity under political duress.

Throughout the film, Peking Opera oscillates between preservation and politicisation. Under Japanese occupation, it is cast as nostalgic spectacle, a remnant of a fading imperial past. Under Maoist reforms, it undergoes a radical transformation into revolutionary opera, with classical themes discarded in favour of proletarian narratives (Clark 113). The Cultural Revolution marks the most violent rupture, as traditional forms of art are denounced as feudal relics.

The scene in which Dieyi and Xiaolou are publicly humiliated and coerced into renouncing their art in a *struggle session* crystallises the full ideological reconfiguration of tradition under totalitarian rule. The scene's raw intensity underscores the broader erasure of cultural memory, as artists, once venerated, are forced to betray their own identities to survive.

While many scholarly interpretations of *Farewell My Concubine* have positioned these historical ruptures within the framework of national trauma, such readings often neglect the film's transnational dimensions. The film does not merely recount China's internal cultural struggles; rather, it stages these ideological ruptures within a Third Space (Bhabha 55), where they acquire new meanings in global cinematic memory. The representation of Peking Opera as a battleground for ideological control is thus not confined to a Chinese historical narrative but extends into a broader discourse on how cultural heritage is repackaged and reframed for international spectatorship. This transnational circulation of memory complicates simplistic notions of authenticity, raising the question: does cultural heritage remain "authentic" when translated into a cinematic form intended for global consumption, or does it inevitably undergo reinvention? The film negotiates this tension, offering Peking Opera as both a site of nostalgia and a medium of historical contestation, ultimately demonstrating how ideological upheaval reshapes artistic forms not only within national borders but also in the global imagination.

Gender, Performance, and Cultural Hybridity

The film's exploration of gender fluidity, particularly through the figure of Cheng Dieyi, further reinforces its engagement with cultural hybridity. Peking Opera has long been an arena where rigid gender binaries dissolve, with male performers embodying *dan* roles—female characters marked by stylised femininity. However, *Farewell My Concubine* does not merely replicate this tradition; rather, it interrogates its implications within both personal identity and cinematic spectatorship. Dieyi's devotion to his *dan* role extends beyond the stage, intertwining his selfhood with Concubine Yu's tragic fate. This entanglement manifests in Yuan Shiqing's observation: "Ironically, *Farewell My Concubine* has turned into *Farewell My King*" (Kaige 40:23). The line alludes to Dieyi's grief when Xiaolou marries Juxian, a courtesan, disrupting the intimate artistic bond between the two opera performers. The original play within the film depicts the historical moment when the King of Chu bids farewell to his concubine, who slits her throat in an act of ultimate devotion. In Dieyi's lived reality, this narrative is unconsciously reenacted: his love for Xiaolou, though never explicitly acknowledged, finds expression through his theatrical role. The moment he proclaims they will never perform together again mirrors Concubine Yu's tragic sacrifice, demonstrating how performance, gender, and identity collapse into one another.

Dieyi's offstage cry of "My King" to Xiaolou reinforces Judith Butler's theory of performativity, wherein identity is not innate but enacted through repetitive gestures (Butler 134). Dieyi's subjectivity is thus not fixed but fluid, oscillating between theatrical performance and personal devotion. However, Xiaolou's conventional masculinity resists this fluidity, embodying a rigid adherence to heteronormative expectations. The tension between the two men reflects the broader struggle between tradition and modernity, masculinity and femininity, and authenticity and artifice. While queer readings of *Farewell My Concubine* have focused on Dieyi's unfulfilled love for Xiaolou, such interpretations often overlook the film's negotiation of cultural hybridity. Dieyi's identity, shaped through the aesthetics of Peking Opera, is simultaneously a product of Chinese tradition and a cinematic construct designed for transnational spectatorship. In Bhabha's Third Space, his performance transcends the confines of national identity, becoming a site of negotiation between Chinese heritage and global cinematic representation (Bhabha 58). This perspective shifts the critical lens away from a solely queer analysis and instead positions the film within the broader discourse of how performance, identity, and tradition intersect within global memory. The film, in staging Dieyi's struggle, mirrors the fate of Peking Opera itself—caught between tradition and reinvention, between cultural authenticity and transnational commodification.

Transnational Cinema and the Politics of Representation

The film capitalises on the unique circumstances of hardship and the violence of war as a space for the repressive narrative and for technological and formal experimentation, but it also distorts this revolutionary myth beyond recognition. (Xiaoming et al. 126). As a landmark in transnational cinema, *Farewell My Concubine* operates within a dual framework: it presents a deeply specific historical and cultural narrative while simultaneously appealing to global audiences.

Its critical success at Cannes underscores this duality, positioning it within the broader category of world cinema (Berry and Farquhar 98). However, this global circulation raises questions about representation, particularly in how Chinese culture is staged for Western spectatorship. The film's lush opera visuals and homoerotic subtext risk falling into what Rey Chow terms "coercive mimeticism", the process through which non-Western cultures are shaped to conform to Western expectations of authenticity (Chow 177). Within this dynamic, *Farewell My Concubine* becomes a hybrid text, neither wholly Chinese nor entirely Westernised, but a product of transnational cultural exchange. Dieyi's identity, meticulously constructed within the world of Peking Opera, is thus doubly staged: first, as an operatic persona within the film's diegesis, and second, as a cinematic spectacle tailored for global audiences.

Scholarly discussions have often celebrated the film's historical specificity while neglecting the implications of its repackaging for transnational consumption. This analysis foregrounds the ways in which the film negotiates the tensions between historical authenticity, cinematic adaptation, and global reception. It is not merely a representation of Chinese cultural memory but an active participant in the politics of cultural transmission.

Memory, Trauma, and Global Circulation

Spanning multiple decades, *Farewell My Concubine* presents cultural memory as an unstable and contested site. As Xiaoluo says, "He only cares about opera. No matter the audience be, Nationalists, Japanese, Republicans he will perform for them." Dieyi's unwavering fidelity to opera despite political repression, personal betrayal, and societal transformation suggests an attempt to resist historical erasure. However, his final act of suicide signals the ultimate limitations of such resistance. In this, the film does not merely document historical trauma but actively constructs a cinematic memory text. Andreas Huyssen argues that globalisation reshapes local histories by embedding them within transnational circuits (Huyssen 88). The film's depiction of Dieyi's suffering is thus not confined to a singular national context; rather, it is positioned within a broader global framework of cultural displacement. Dieyi's story becomes a site of solastalgia—the distress experienced when cultural identity is disrupted—making his tragedy not merely personal but emblematic of the larger crisis of cultural continuity in an era of ideological upheaval. The conclusion of *Farewell My Concubine* does not offer closure but rather raises pressing questions about the survival of traditional art forms in the face of historical violence and global commodification. Even as Dieyi's tragic fate suggests a loss of cultural continuity, the film itself ensures that Peking Opera remains inscribed within cinematic history. Thus, the film enacts the very paradox it seeks to explore: it mourns the erosion of cultural heritage while simultaneously ensuring its preservation within the global cinematic landscape.

Conclusion: *Farewell My Concubine* as a Hybrid Cultural Text

Few films navigate the fault lines between tradition and reinvention as deftly as *Farewell My Concubine.* Through its staging of identity, the film transcends historical specificity to engage with larger questions of cultural survival in a rapidly shifting world. Dieyi's performative self, shaped through the aesthetics of Peking Opera, becomes more than a personal tragedy; it serves as a metaphor for the tensions between heritage and modernity, authenticity and adaptation. Rather than merely preserving Peking Opera as a historical relic, the film transforms it into a living, evolving entity, reinterpreted for both local and global audiences. This hybridity extends beyond individual identity, as the film itself resists confinement within a single national or ideological framework. It does not simply chronicle the ideological forces that shape Peking Opera but actively participates in the transnational reconfiguration of cultural memory. The film's ability to oscillate between historical authenticity and cinematic reinterpretation complicates conventional narratives of preservation and loss, revealing how cultural heritage is neither static nor entirely erased by political upheaval but continuously reshaped through performance, ideology, and global circulation. By illuminating the overlooked interplay between hybridity and memory, this analysis positions *Farewell My Concubine* as more than a national allegory; it emerges as a cinematic testament to the enduring fluidity of tradition. As both an artefact of cultural memory and a site of negotiation, the film underscores that heritage is never wholly lost but is instead continually reimagined in response to shifting historical and transnational forces.

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PRESS START TO READ: HOW VIDEO GAMES ARE REVIVING THE HABIT OF READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

Video games can be justified as a form of popular literature because they share fundamental storytelling elements with traditional literary works while offering a unique, interactive experience. Additionally, games incorporate various literary devices such as symbolism, allegory, and nonlinear storytelling to engage players intellectually and emotionally. Text-heavy games like *Ace Attorney*, *Disco Elysium*, and *Dark Souls* have played a crucial role in promoting reading by integrating rich narratives and complex language into interactive experiences. *Ace Attorney* requires players to carefully read and analyse dialogue, evidence, and legal arguments to solve cases, enhancing comprehension and critical thinking. *Disco Elysium* takes this a step further, offering an intricately written, choice-driven story with deep philosophical and political discussions, encouraging players to engage with extensive text and nuanced storytelling. Meanwhile, *Dark Souls* presents its lore in a fragmented yet immersive way, requiring players to read item descriptions, NPC dialogues, and environmental cues to piece together its enigmatic world. This paper will examine how these games not only make reading essential for progression but also cultivate a deeper appreciation for storytelling, encouraging players to seek out similar experiences in literature.

Keywords: *Video Games, Interactive Storytelling, Popular Culture, Digital Media Literacy*

Introduction

Reading has been a cornerstone of human civilization, shaping societies, cultures, and individual minds for centuries. It serves as a bridge between generations, allowing knowledge, traditions, and ideas to be preserved and passed down over time. Through reading, people gain access to history, philosophy, science, and the arts, expanding their understanding of the world and fostering intellectual growth. It is not only a tool for acquiring information but also a means of developing critical thinking, empathy, and creativity. Beyond its role in education, reading is essential for social progress and cultural development. It enables individuals to engage with diverse perspectives, promoting tolerance and informed decision-making in democratic societies. Literature, in particular, provides a reflection of human experiences, offering insights into different cultures, emotions, and ways of life. From ancient manuscripts to digital texts, reading remains a fundamental aspect of human communication and identity, continuously shaping the way societies evolve and interact.

The advancement of technology has enabled easy access to electronic or digital versions of traditional texts, simply referred to collectively as electronic resources (hereafter e-resources). These e-resources offer numerous advantages, including easy accessibility via the Internet, eliminating the need for users to visit a physical library. This is particularly beneficial for individuals in rural and remote areas. Users can download and save materials on their personal devices, and multiple users can access the same journal or document simultaneously. Additionally, e-resources provide the convenience of access from any location at any time, enabling comprehensive searches across multiple sources through a single search interface. Another key benefit of e-resources is the ability to track usage statistics, helping library staff assess resource demand. Journals and articles are often published online before their print versions, and hypertext links within digital content allow users to explore related materials seamlessly. Unlike print documents, electronic resources incorporate multimedia elements such as audio, video, and animations, enhancing the reading experience.

As digital reading habits continue to evolve, society at large are adapting to screen-based reading and developing new strategies to navigate the vast amount of available information. In a study conducted at the University Teknologi MARA Sarawak; it was found that out of 2340 students, 44% of them preferred reading from websites as compared to other choices such as print books and e-books. 49% preferred reading from mobile phones, 44% preferred reading from a print book, and 7% preferred computers. The findings from this study showed that the rise of information and technology has extensively changed the trends and behaviors of the student's reading habits, as they slowly move away from printed books to digital ones (Yusof 43).

From another study conducted at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, it has been found that out of 200 students only 85% students are familiar with electronic resources whereas 15% are not. Out of 200 students, 90% students use e-resources for reading and the other 10% don't (Roy et al).

Thus, it can be safely concluded that a large number of modern youth readers utilize means beyond conventional texts for studies. It can be further assumed that since the youth are aware of the existence of digital texts, they might use them not only for study but for leisure as well. This shows that the youth are more likely to engage with virtual or electronic mediums including that of video games.

Video Games as a Form of Literary Media

The video game genre has become deeply embedded in popular culture today, significantly influencing society and reflecting contemporary life. This growing impact has necessitated serious academic exploration. Although video games differ from literary narratives in their technical aspects, they also possess a strong narrative component. Beyond serving as a form of entertainment, this narrative dimension holds substantial literary value, akin to traditional literary genres. As a result, video games provide a rich field for analysis through the lens of appropriate literary theories.

Video games emerged in the mid-20th century, making them a relatively new addition to popular culture. As a result, the term itself requires further clarification to better capture the medium's unique capabilities and distinguishing features from other narrative forms. To define "video game", one must first break down the words, "video" and "game." By taking these two words together, video games appear to resemble traditional games like board or card games, with the primary difference being that they are played through a video-based medium.

While video games can exhibit a variety of characteristics, Mark J.P. Wolf identifies four core elements: conflict (against an opponent or circumstances), rules (establishing what actions are allowed and when), player ability (such as skill, strategy, or luck), and a valued outcome (such as winning versus losing, achieving the highest score, or completing a task in the shortest time) (3). Given the vast array of video game genres – from strategy and action to puzzle-based games – the mechanics and gameplay experience can vary significantly from one game to another.

The potential for storytelling in video games was arguably first demonstrated in *Colossal Cave Adventure*, a text-based adventure game developed by Will Crowther between 1975 and 1977. Players were immersed in the role of a caver exploring an uncharted cave, relying solely on textual descriptions to navigate the environment. With no graphical capability beyond text, the game enabled interaction through simple text commands, such as pressing 'e' to move east, allowing players to shape their journey through written input. Writing about these text-based adventure games, Nick Montfort claims that:

> In order for a work to be interactive fiction, it must be able to react to input meaningfully. A program is not interactive fiction if it simply prints the same series of texts, or a random series of texts, in response to input, or if it outputs some transformation of the input string without understanding that string. (32-33)

Other creators began to create their own text adventure games similar to *Colossal Cave Adventure,* and the genre continued to advance by adding visual elements such as simple graphical scenes to depict what was occurring.

The video games examined in this study feature narrative structures similar to those found in traditional storytelling mediums like books and movies. However, a key distinction is that player interaction is required to advance the narrative. The player's input determines the outcome of various scenarios, with some games offering multiple paths and choices. While certain games follow a fixed storyline with a predetermined ending, others allow for branching narratives and multiple possible conclusions.

The Evolution of the Interactive Text Adventure

The video game series *Ace Attorney* (2001 – present), developed by Japanese studio Capcom, can be considered a modern successor to the early text adventure video games like *Colossal Cave Adventure*. There are 11 games in the series as of the time of writing of this study. The series is focused on telling stories centred around the modern legal system but in a somewhat exaggerated manner to place emphasis on character development. The series follows defence attorneys as they investigate cases, gather evidence, and engage in courtroom trials to prove their clients' innocence. Combining investigative gameplay with intense, dialogue-driven legal battles, the series is renowned for its engaging narratives, compelling characters, and dramatic twists.

The franchise primarily centres around the protagonist Phoenix Wright, a defence attorney known for his determination and ability to uncover the truth in seemingly unwinnable cases. As the series progresses, other protagonists, such as Apollo Justice and Athena Cykes, are introduced, each bringing unique skills to the courtroom. The gameplay is divided into two main phases: investigation, where

players collect evidence and interact with witnesses, and trials, where they cross-examine testimonies, present evidence, and use logic to expose contradictions.

With a distinctive blend of mystery, humour, and legal drama, *Ace Attorney* has gained critical and commercial success, spawning multiple sequels, spin-offs, and adaptations, including anime, manga, and stage productions. Its distinctive art style, memorable characters, and engaging storytelling continue to make it a beloved franchise within the text adventure game genre. Traditionally, text adventures relied on command-based inputs and static narratives, but *Ace Attorney* modernises the genre by introducing dynamic gameplay elements, enhancing player engagement, and refining narrative complexity. The series combines visual novel storytelling with investigative mechanics. Players actively participate in gathering evidence, questioning witnesses, and cross-examining testimonies, allowing for a more immersive and interactive experience. This hybrid approach keeps the player engaged while maintaining the essence of text-driven storytelling.

Ace Attorney incorporates character animations, expressive graphical sprite work, and a user-friendly interface. This makes the game more visually engaging while still maintaining the core text-based decision-making mechanics of the genre. Additionally, its intuitive gameplay mechanics, such as highlighting inconsistencies in statements rather than typing out commands, lower the barrier of entry for players unfamiliar with traditional text adventures. Beyond simple dialogue interactions, *Ace Attorney* integrates puzzle-solving elements that challenge players to think critically. The courtroom sections require logical reasoning and deduction, adding layers of complexity that go beyond the traditional "choose your own adventure" format. By weaving compelling character-driven storytelling with engaging gameplay, *Ace Attorney* has influenced modern visual novels and adventure games. Many contemporary narrative-driven games, such as *Danganronpa* and *AI: The Somnium Files*, borrow from its investigative and courtroom-style mechanics, showcasing its lasting impact on the evolution of the text adventure genre. According to the developer Capcom, the series has sold a total of 13 million copies, which serves as a testament to the popularity of the text adventure game. Despite video games now offering many diverse experiences focused on kinetic action and instant gratification, there still remains a place for these text-heavy narrative games.

The video game *Disco Elysium,* developed by the Estonian game studio ZA/UM, is also heavily narrative-focused like *Ace Attorney.* The game's setting is derived from the world introduced in the 2013 novel *Sacred and Terrible Air*, written by Robert Kurvitz, a member of the studio. Kurvitz is the lead writer for the game and is thus regarded as the primary author responsible for the majority of the game's narrative. The game's mechanics are based on the structure of traditional tabletop role-playing games. As such, many of the decisions in the game rely on the role of virtual dice. The developers, being avid players of *Dungeons & Dragons*, chose to model the game in this way. At the start of the game, players are given the option to customise the protagonist, a detective named Harrier DuBois (or Harry). The player character can internalise a variety of ideologies, ranging from political to spiritual to social beliefs. These internalised thoughts, along with the character's chosen skills, shape how the player interacts with the world and influence how the game's inhabitants respond to them. The narrative primarily centres on Harry, an amnesiac detective assigned to solve a murder in the fictional district of Martinaise. As the story unfolds, players gather clues and information by interrogating civilians and exploring the area.

Disco Elysium builds upon the narrative elements used in the *Ace Attorney* series by expanding the scope of player-driven storytelling and integrating more complex decision-making, character development, and psychological depth into the narrative experience. While *Ace Attorney* focuses on courtroom drama and investigative procedures within a legal framework, *Disco Elysium* broadens the possibilities of interactive storytelling by immersing players in a richly detailed, open-world environment where dialogue and choices shape not just the outcome of a case but the very identity of the protagonist. There are over 1.2 million written words within the game, according to lead writer Helen Hindpere, facilitating an overwhelming amount of variety that can cater to all kinds of players.

Both *Ace Attorney* and *Disco Elysium* centre around dialogue and the manipulation of information as the primary means of progressing through the game. In *Ace Attorney*, players use evidence and contradictions to influence conversations and win cases. In *Disco Elysium*, the protagonist, Detective Harrier DuBois, engages in deep conversations that shape the story. However, *Disco Elysium* takes this further by allowing a wide range of choices that reflect the protagonist's evolving personality and mental state, based on both internal and external factors. This expanded dialogue system, powered by multiple skills like Intellect, Psyche, and Physique, gives players even greater influence over their character's development and the direction of the story. Like *Ace Attorney*, *Disco Elysium* involves investigative elements, with the player working to solve a crime. However, *Disco Elysium* expands the investigative framework beyond just facts and evidence. While *Ace Attorney* focuses on proving innocence through logical deductions and evidence presentation, *Disco Elysium* incorporates investigative work that is

interwoven with philosophical and psychological undertones. The detective's internal struggles and personal growth during the investigation are as significant as the external mysteries he seeks to solve.

Disco Elysium builds upon the narrative foundations laid in *Ace Attorney* by expanding the interactive storytelling experience to include a deeper psychological and philosophical exploration of the protagonist's character. Where *Ace Attorney* emphasises logic and courtroom drama through evidence and cross-examination, *Disco Elysium* offers a broader, more introspective narrative that gives the player greater control over the protagonist's development and the world around them. The result is a more complex, open-ended narrative that challenges players not only to solve mysteries but also to engage with the moral and existential dilemmas of the protagonist's journey.

Diverging from the traditional method of narrative are the *Souls* (2009 – present) series of video games created by Hidetaka Miyazaki and developed by the Japanese studio FromSoftware, Inc. There have been seven games in the series as of 2025. They are known for their cryptic storytelling and vast background lore, which requires players to actively engage with the game's text-based elements to fully understand their worlds. Unlike traditional narrative-driven games that present their stories through cutscenes or direct exposition, the *Souls* series promotes reading as an essential part of the player's experience.

Unlike *Ace Attorney* and *Disco Elysium*, the *Souls* series are action video games that require quick reactions and involve fighting with enemies as a majority of the experience. However, these games promote reading in a different way. While going through the games, players will find items with brief descriptions on them. Reading these descriptions is not necessary to progress in the game; however, doing so will help players understand the story much more coherently. Items such as weapons, armour, and spells all come with short, often cryptic descriptions that provide historical context, character backgrounds, or hints about the world. Players who take the time to read and piece together these details gain a richer understanding of the game's setting and hidden narratives. This encourages players to engage in careful reading and analysis, much like deciphering a fragmented historical text. For example, the description for the item "Dragonslayer Swordspear" in *Dark Souls III* (2016) reads:

> A dragon hunting weapon from the age of the gods. The earliest form of the cross spear, serving as both a sword and a spear. Its owner was the Nameless King, a deific hunter of dragons. The swordspear is imbued with lightning, of which he was the heir.

It was shown in the description for the "Ring of the Sun's First Born" in *Dark Souls* I (2011) that the god of sun and lightning, Gwyn, had a son who inherited from him but was "stripped of his stature as punishment for his foolishness". By reading the description of the swordspear in *Dark Souls III*, it is revealed that the character the Nameless King was the aforementioned son of Gwyn. This information would have been completely unknown to a player who had simply played these games without reading any of the item descriptions.

Additionally, the games feature characters that rarely provide straightforward explanations. Instead, their dialogue is often vague, poetic, or philosophical, requiring players to read between the lines to grasp the full meaning. This indirect storytelling encourages multiple readings and deeper engagement with the text, as players must infer details from sparse, ambiguous conversations. The fragmented nature of the *Souls* series' lore turns exploration into a literary puzzle. By reading item descriptions, examining environmental clues, and connecting different pieces of dialogue, players reconstruct the overarching story. This method of storytelling resembles an interactive novel where the reader must assemble the plot through scattered text fragments.

This unconventional storytelling method of the *Souls* games has been met with great success among the players. As a cursory glance at YouTube will reveal, thousands of videos with millions of views go into detail on the textual storytelling of the series. Because the games provide minimal exposition, players often turn to online discussions, wikis, and fan theories to decipher the lore. This fosters a culture of close reading and textual analysis, where players engage in discussions, compare interpretations, and collectively build a deeper understanding of the game's world – similar to literary analysis in academic settings.

Conclusion

The *Ace Attorney* series, *Disco Elysium*, and the *Dark Souls* series, though distinct in gameplay and narrative structure, all encourage and even necessitate reading as a core component of player engagement. These games integrate text-heavy storytelling, environmental storytelling, and intricate dialogue systems that immerse players in their respective worlds while promoting active reading and comprehension.

In the *Ace Attorney* series, reading is the primary method through which players interact with the game's narrative. As a courtroom-based visual novel, players take on the role of a defense attorney who

must carefully read through testimonies, evidence descriptions, and legal arguments to uncover contradictions and solve cases.

The game challenges players to read critically, pay close attention to details, and recall past statements to form logical connections. Because the game rewards keen observation and analytical thinking, players naturally develop stronger reading comprehension and problem-solving skills as they progress through increasingly complex cases.

Disco Elysium expands upon this concept by offering an even more text-driven experience. Unlike most RPGs that emphasise combat, this game relies entirely on dialogue and internal monologues to shape the protagonist's story and decisions. The game's extensive branching narrative, influenced by the player's internalised thoughts and skills, encourages deep reading and engagement with philosophical, political, and psychological themes. Conversations can stretch into thousands of words, resembling the depth of a novel, requiring players to process intricate language and interpret subtext. The variety of dialogue options and the consequences of each choice further reinforce active reading, as players must carefully consider the tone and implications of their responses.

Meanwhile, the *Dark Souls* series takes a different approach, promoting reading through environmental storytelling and cryptic item descriptions. Unlike traditional narrative-driven games, *Dark Souls* does not explicitly present its story through cutscenes or dialogue but rather through scattered lore embedded in item descriptions, NPC dialogues, and environmental details. Players who wish to understand the game's world and mythology must take the initiative to read and piece together fragmented information from various sources. This approach rewards curiosity and deep engagement, encouraging players to read attentively and analyse the significance of each detail.

Across these games, reading is not merely a passive activity but a crucial means of progressing, understanding, and fully experiencing their intricately crafted worlds. Whether through courtroom battles, philosophical introspection, or deciphering hidden lore, these games challenge players to engage with text in ways that enhance their literacy, critical thinking, and appreciation for narrative complexity.

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MEMORY, REMEMBRANCE & MISREMEMBERING IN J.K. ROWLING'S *HARRY POTTER SERIES*

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Abstract

Memory and remembrance play a crucial role in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. It has shaped the characters while reinforcing the themes of love, loss, and resilience. One of the most direct manifestations of memory in the series is the Pensieve, the Mirror of Erised, and Horcruxes. Through magical constructs as well as individualistic recollections, Rowling highlights the power of memory in both preserving the past and influencing the future. This paper explores the significance of memory and remembrance in *Harry Potter* series, examining how these elements navigate a new form of storytelling by integrating the past and the present. Secondly, this paper also aims at analysing how the story interprets personal grief, collective history, or magical intervention, through memory and suggests it to become a powerful force shaping individuals and society. The act of remembrance is subjective and in the act of remembering, we often misremember. This paper, lastly, discusses the instances of misremembering and tampered memories in *Harry Potter* series. Memory becomes a space of manipulation and forgetfulness, countering the true art of remembering. J. K. Rowling roots her narrative with memory and it operates a significant control on the characters' psychological sense and perception. This paper draws theoretical understanding from Maurice Halbwach's concept of collective memory.

Keywords: *Memory, Remembering, Misremember, Space, Collective Memory, Magic*

Introduction

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is deeply concerned with the nature of memory, remembrance, and misremembering. Throughout the seven books, memory is portrayed as a means of preserving history, understanding identity, and uncovering truth. However, memory is also fallible, subject to distortion, suppression, and manipulation. Magical objects such as the Pensieve, the role of collective remembrance in wizarding history, and individual characters' experiences with memory all contribute to a rich exploration of how the past shapes the present. This paper examines the significance of memory in *Harry Potter*, focusing on the mechanisms of remembering, the role of remembrance in shaping identity and history, and the implications of misremembering.

The Magical Mechanisms of Memory: The Pensive as an Archive

One of the most striking ways in which memory is explored in the series is through magical means. The Pensieve, introduced in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, is an object that allows its user to extract, store, and re-examine memories. This object serves as a literal manifestation of Dumbledore's belief that memories hold truth, often revealing details that the mind might overlook or misremember. Dumbledore frequently uses the Pensieve to analyse memories, demonstrating that even when the mind forgets or distorts, an objective record remains. For example, in *The Half-Blood Prince*, Harry and Dumbledore explore the memories of various individuals to understand Voldemort's past, ultimately revealing the crucial secret of Horcruxes (Rowling). This suggests that memory is not just personal but can also serve a broader, investigative function. At the same time, the Pensieve is not infallible. Memories can be altered or incomplete, as seen in *The Order of the Phoenix* when Snape removes certain memories before allowing Harry to witness them (Radigan). Similarly, Slughorn deliberately modifies his memory of a conversation with Tom Riddle, demonstrating that even magical records of memory are susceptible to manipulation, evident in the lines, "*Slughorn raised his wand, placed the tip to his temple, and began to draw out the memory, a thick, wispy substance like silvery cobwebs, which he deposited into Dumbledore's Pensieve.*" (Rowling)

This reflects real-world concerns about the reliability of historical accounts and personal recollections. Memory becomes a space of forgetfulness. It is relevant to our understanding of the manipulation of data and facts in history. George Orwell's *1984* explores a representation of how memory and truth are suppressed to implement a totalitarian regime. Through techniques such as systematic suppression of facts, propaganda and revising history through altering memory, the Big Brother Party envisions power. History was rewritten to adequately serve the needs of the Party (O'Har). Personal memory is suppressed through tools of fear, language control and erasure of memory. The rationale behind drawing this reference to George Orwell's *1984* is because of the point of comparison between the two works in terms of authoritarian rule and oppression.

In *Harry Potter,* Voldemort reinstates the Ministry of Magic with his followers and implements a similar authoritative regime as the Big Brother Party in *1984.* This is relevant in *The Deathly Hallows,* where the Ministry of Magic becomes an institution of oppressive law and executes systematic violence on people (Rowling).

One of the tools that the Ministry of Magic uses is the daily newspaper *The Daily Prophet,* to censor truth, suppress people's personal ideologies, spread propaganda and alter memory. For instance, through *The Daily Prophet,* Harry is labelled as a manipulator, and he is accused of lying in *The Order of the Phoenix.* Dolores Umbridge also used techniques to rewrite history in Hogwarts, echoing the context of historical revisionism in George Orwell's *1984* (Orwell). Memory is therefore weaponised for social control.

Remembrance and Identity

Memory plays a crucial role in the formation of identity throughout the series. Harry himself is profoundly shaped by his memories of his parents, whom he never met but knows through stories, photographs, and the echoes left by the Killing Curse. His desire to understand his past and his parents' legacy fuels his journey. Remembrance also extends to the broader wizarding world. The characters such as Albus Dumbledore and Sirius Black stress the importance of remembering the past to guide the future. Dumbledore, in particular, understands that forgetting the lessons of history can lead to dire consequences. This is most evident in *The Goblet of Fire*, where the return of Voldemort is met with denial by the Ministry of Magic, paralleling real-world instances of historical amnesia and the dangers it poses. The theme of remembrance is also evident in the series' treatment of war and loss. The sacrifices of those who fought against Voldemort, such as Lily and James Potter, Cedric Diggory, and Dobby the elf, are honoured by those who survive them. The Battle of Hogwarts in *The Deathly Hallows* cements this theme, as characters reflect on past conflicts and those who gave their lives. The remembrance of these fallen individuals becomes a driving force for change, reinforcing the idea that memory has power beyond the personal level—it can shape collective action and societal values (Behr).

Distortion of Memory: The Act of Misremembering

While memory is a tool for truth and identity, it is also subject to distortion. The text depicts instances of distort or modify memories to deceive, mislead, obliviate, manipulate through magical and non-magical means. It examines instances of memories being altered, erased and misinterpreted. Memory is also distorted in Harry Potter series through trauma and fear, or non-magical means. The distortion of memory, therefore leads to the act of misremembering. One of the most significant examples of misremembering in *Harry Potter* is the way the Ministry of Magic manipulates public perception. During *The Order of the Phoenix*, the Ministry actively works to rewrite recent history, denying Voldemort's return and portraying Harry as delusional. This manipulation of memory reflects real-world propaganda tactics, where those in power shape public memory to maintain control. In another instance, Gilderoy Lockhart, the fraudulent celebrity in *The Chamber of Secrets*, who builds his career on false memories. Lockhart uses memory charms to erase the recollections of others and claim their achievements as his own (Rowling). This highlights how memory can be weaponized, leading to the erasure of truth and the construction of false narratives.

One of the significant devices that is associated to memory is Tom Riddle's diary. The diary is a record, an archive of Tom Riddle's past. It becomes a powerful tool aiming towards Harry's interaction with Tom Riddle's past. It becomes a powerful metaphor of the intersections of past and present. It is an instance of how memory shapes the alteration of the present. Tom Riddle's diary in *The Chamber of Secrets* becomes a representation of manipulation of memory. We can identify a theoretical overlap through Maurice Halbwach's idea of collective memory. Halbwach develops the concept of collective memory referring to how groups construct, retains, remembers and transmits memories over generations (Halbwachs). His key argument is shaped on the idea that memory is shaped socially. He argues that memory survives within the social frameworks and it is not restricted to an individual mental process. It exists within the social framework which is influence by divided narratives, institutions and organizations and traditions (Leroux and Marcel). As the society evolves, memories do not remain static. It is in a state of continuum and the reinterpretation of the past continuously happens. Riddle's diary becomes much more than a simple record of the past. A part of Tom Riddle's soul, which is later identified as a Horcrux, is stored in the diary and it interacts with the readers such as Ginny Weasley (Radigan). The diary forces Ginny to alter her actions as Ginny relives Tom Riddle's past as her own, when she reopens the Chamber of Secrets. Memory, therefore, is transmitted from Tom Riddle through the diary to Ginny Weasley, in the present time. Tom Riddle rewrites the past and transmits it to the next generation, emphasizing Halbwach's idea memory existing in the social frameworks. The diary is a weaponized tool of collective memory, which alters the truth and replaces it by a singular narrative, with the intention for power and control.

Distortion of memory, or the act of misremembering, is also depicted in a new light in the books. Severus Snape's memories offer another layer to the discussion of misremembering. For most of the series, Harry views Snape as cruel and antagonistic. However, in *The Deathly Hallows*, Snape's memories reveal a different perspective—one of unrequited love and sacrifice. These memories challenge Harry's previous assumptions, demonstrating how limited perspectives can lead to misinterpretations of people and events.

The text provided a nuanced representation of memory for the first time in the series, and inevitably, it contributed to the significant theme of love in the text. These instances highlight the nature of memory as fragile, often used as a defence mechanism, a weapon and for unspoken truths.

It is imperative to discuss the concept of time and space when memory is analysed. The idea of time and space is constantly in a state of flux when memory is represented. The intersections of the past and present memories also affect the time and space surrounding it. These three elements combined are in a state of continuum.

Time, Space, Memory: The Tale of Continuum

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, while primarily a fantasy narrative, plays with the concepts of time and space in intriguing ways. While it does not adhere strictly to real-world physics, the series incorporates magical elements that manipulate time and space in ways that often parallel scientific theories. The most prominent aspects of time and space manipulation in the *Harry Potter* universe include **time travel through the Time-Turner, spatial distortions in magical objects and places**, and **instantaneous travel methods like Apparition and Portkeys.** This essay explores how these elements function within the wizarding world, their implications for storytelling, and how they align or contrast with real-world scientific theories of time and space.

One of the most significant instances of time manipulation in the *Harry Potter* series is the introduction of the Time-Turner in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling). This magical device allows a user to travel back in time, usually by a few hours, with the strict rule that they must not be seen by their past selves or others. The narrative structure of the novel suggests that time in the *Harry Potter* universe follows a closed time looptheory—meaning that whatever a time traveller does in the past was always meant to happen. For instance, when Harry and Hermione use the Time-Turner to save Sirius Black and Buckbeak, they do not actually alter history; instead, they fulfil events that had already occurred. Earlier in the book, Harry believes someone else casts the powerful Patronus that saves him and Sirius from Dementors, only to realise later that it was actually his future self. This paradox-free handling of time travel prevents contradictions. This approach is in contrast with many sciences fiction works where time travel allows for multiple timelines or alternate realities (Horstkotte). In *Harry Potter*, time is depicted as a self-contained, unchangeable cycle. The elasticity of time and space in the concept of time travelling allowed Harry and his friends to revisit their memories of the past, spatially and physically; however, this did not result in any contradiction in the already standing memory.

Conclusion

The *Harry Potter* series presents memory as a multifaceted force that can preserve truth, shape identity, and be manipulated for personal or political ends. Through magical tools like the Pensieve, the personal struggles of characters like Harry and Snape, and the broader historical remembrance within the wizarding world, Rowling explores the complexity of memory. The series ultimately suggests that while memory is fallible, the act of remembering is crucial for justice, identity, and the future. By acknowledging both the power and the limitations of memory, *Harry Potter* encourages readers to critically engage with the past and the ways it shapes our understanding of the present. The series presents a unique and internally consistent interpretation of time and space manipulation through magic. Time travel is governed by a **closed-loop theory** that prevents paradoxes, while space can be expanded, shrunk, or bypassed entirely through spells and enchanted objects. Rowling's world-building balances the fantastical with structured magical laws, ensuring that these manipulations serve the story rather than overcomplicate it. While it does not follow strict scientific principles, *Harry Potter*'s magical take on the time-space continuum offers a fascinating lens through which to explore these concepts in both fiction and reality. The books demonstrate a preservation, interrogation and reframing of the magical history of Hogwarts.

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THE PARTITION 1947 ON SCREEN: CINEMATIC NARRATIVES OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

The Partition of 1947, a pivotal moment in South Asian history, led to one of the largest forced migrations, resulting in profound socio-political and cultural ramifications. This traumatic event has been extensively explored in literature, film, and television, serving as a crucial medium for articulating memory, identity, and historical discourse. Cinematic representations of the Partition have significantly shaped public consciousness by providing varied perspectives on its impact. This paper critically examines how these representations have evolved from nationalist grand narratives to contemporary explorations of personal and collective trauma, displacement, and reconciliation.

This study interrogates how these cultural texts engage with historical memory, identity formation, and postcolonial anxieties through critical analysis of *Garam Hava* and *Tamas*. The theoretical framework draws upon Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities", Edward Said's critique of "colonial discourse", and Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" to unravel the ideological underpinnings of these portrayals. Additionally, this paper examines the influence of digital platforms in recontextualising Partition narratives for contemporary audiences, emphasising the role of media in mediating historical memory. By engaging with the intersection of film, television, and literature, this study highlights the significance of popular culture in sustaining, contesting, and reshaping the historical narratives of the Partition.

Keywords: The Partition 1947, Film, Television, Cultural Memory, Identity, Postcolonialism, Trauma

The catastrophic event of the Partition of 1947 is among the most defining and tragic events in South Asian history, precipitating violence, displacement, and socio-political upheaval across this region. The event resulted in one of the largest forced migrations in human history, with approximately fifteen million people displaced and over a million losing their lives. The Partition left psychological and cultural scars on the collective memory of the inhabitants of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Television, movies, and literature have all been vital in describing this experience, influencing public opinion, and offering a range of viewpoints on its effects. Cinematic representations of the Partition range from nationalist grand narratives to layered explorations of personal and collective trauma, displacement, and the inevitability of reconciliation.

The nationalist perspective often influenced early portrayals of the Partition in film adaptations. These cinematic depictions largely reflected the official narratives of India and Pakistan. Cinema from both nations reinforced patriotism by aligning with state-driven historical interpretations. Patriotism was strengthened in both nations through the images of the nations lined up with the historical narratives dictated by the State. This research paper critically analyses how these representations have changed, emphasising two critical cinematic adaptations, *Tamas* and *GaramHava*. Through the dynamics of being settled by another country and the principles of postcolonialism, these adaptations became important cultural texts that highlight the themes of identity construction and historical memory. The theoretical framework for this study includes some of the major literary ideas of Homi Bhabha, especially "hybridity" (Bhabha 4), Edward Said's notion of "colonial discourse", and Benedict Anderson's "concept of imagined communities" (Anderson 6) as a means to critically analyse the ideological basis of these depictions. This paper highlights the importance of media in mediating historical memory by examining how digital platforms can recontextualise the Partition narratives for postmodern readers.

These adaptations frequently focused on themes of sacrifice, bravery, and the strengthening of national identity while viewing the tragedy of the Partition through a patriotic prism. As time went on, though, filmmakers started taking a more reflective stance and exploring the real-life experiences of those impacted by the Partition; for example, *Tamas*, a television series directed by Govind Nihalani and based on Bhisham Sahni's novel, offers a catastrophic depiction of the violence and displacement caused by the Partition. Unlike mainstream cinematic portrayals, *Tamas* does not attempt to romanticise or sanitise the horrors of the Partition. Rather, it offers a stark examination of communal tensions, political manipulation, and the human toll of the division. The series uses stark realism, strong performances, and careful historical detail to convey the chaos and despair that characterised the Partition. By concentrating on ordinary people trapped in extraordinary situations, *Tamas* highlights the nuances of historical memory and subverts the simplistic nationalist narratives that tend to dominate debates about the Partition. A powerful depiction of the consequences of Partition is demonstrated in *Garam Hava,* which presents a complex and highly emotive image of the socio-political and emotional traumas that attend people and communities after Partition.

The narrative describes a Muslim family grappling with marginalisation, identity, and belonging in post-Partition India. *Garam Hava* provides a human and highly personal account of the impact of Partition on the daily lives of the inhabitants, as opposed to the nationalist narratives of earlier times. The cinematic adaptation resists the absolute identity divide wrought by Partition and deplores the limiting nationalism that evolved in its wake through its sophisticated character portrayal of the protagonist, Salim Mirza.

The postcolonial theorist explains these adaptations at the theoretical level in terms of Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" (Anderson 6), which contends that countries are constructed realities that come into being through commonly told stories, symbols, and historical events. The framework here applies specifically when understanding how *Tamas* and *Garam Hava* stage the re-fashioning of national identities after Partition.

In *Tamas*, the fragility of the conjured nation is exposed with the outbreak of communal tensions that disrupt cohabitation and make people re-look at where they belong. The work reveals how Partition had converted neighbours into enemies, such as in the figure of Harnam Singh, who gets unwillingly swept into violence against Muslims. The citation, "Yeh mulkhamaratha, par ab humeinismejagahnahin" ("This land was ours, but now there is no place for us in it"), highlights the disillusionment of the people who had found themselves suddenly removed from their homeland (Sahni 162). Likewise, the assertion "Ab sirf Hindu aur Mussalman hain, aadmikahinkhogayahai" ("Now there are only Hindus and Muslims; humanity has been lost") captures the way Partition broke down commonalities and substituted them with fixed communal opposites, supporting Anderson's contention that national identities depend on historical and political constructs rather than essential affiliations (Sahni 142).

Similarly, *Garam Hava* probes the disputed identity of national belonging by way of the experiences of Salim Mirza, a Muslim entrepreneur navigating post-Partition India. His insistent repetition, "Yeh hamaramulkhai" ("This is our country"), despite the persecution he faces, speaks to a gesture of recovering his position in an increasingly exclusive national order (Satyu 22). The conversation "Muslim hotohsaboot do ki Hindustani ho" ("If you are a Muslim, prove that you are Indian") also demonstrates how national identity was reconfigured in terms of religious affiliation and loyalty instead of common cultural heritage. The final sequence of the film, where Salim participates in a protest march, represents the need for active assertion against a reconfigured nation-state. This is consistent with Anderson's contention that the imagined community exists through mutual participation in national discourse and not just territorial existence.

In the comparative reading of the stories, both *Tamas* and *Garam Hava* illustrate how the Partition required a rethinking of national identity, where hitherto homogenous communities were compelled into new ideological and geographical compartments. The theory of Anderson explains how the imagined community of the subcontinent broke apart, resulting in rival national narratives that attempted to redefine the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Edward Said's challenge to colonial discourse offers a deconstructive way of understanding the ideological currents responsible for framing Partition narratives. Colonial policies of divide and rule perpetuated communal politics, rationalising Partition as the necessary consequence of incompatibles. The colonial legacy highlighted by *Tamas* shows how politicians used religious rifts to consolidate power. The utterance, "Angrez jaarahe hain, par aaglagakar" ("The British are leaving, but after setting everything on fire"), highlights the role of colonial policy in contributing to communal tensions. Said's claim that "nations are narrations" comes into play here, for *Tamas* problematises mainstream nationalist myths by demystifying Partition as a political construction rather than an unproblematic historical inevitability.

The theory of 'hybridity' also gives a glimpse into the dynamic and negotiated quality of identity in post-Partition South Asia. *Garam Hava* and *Tamas* show characters stuck in in-between places, not completely part of one nation and yet not disconnected from their heritage. Salim Mirza's inner turmoil in *Garam Hava* is reflected in his statement, "Agar sab chalejayenge, tohyahankaunrahega?" ("If all leave, who will stay here?"), shows his difficulty in balancing personal identity with political necessity. In *Tamas*, too, Nathu, a Dalit tanner, stands in a marginal space, much like Bhabha's "third space" where identities are perpetually negotiated. His pronouncement, "Humein sirf marne ke liye yaad kiya jata hai" ("We are only remembered when we are needed for death"), highlights the exclusion of some groups of people from national histories. Collectively, Said's and Bhabha's theories point out how the Partition was not merely a geopolitical occurrence but a continuous process of identity negotiation that was influenced by historical and ideological imperatives.

Over the past two decades, internet platforms have come to play a major role in recontextualising Partition accounts for modern times. Online video streaming, social media, and digital archives made it easier for more Partition tales to be made accessible, allowing for more heterogeneity and complex representations. Web series, independent films, and documentaries have come to be useful tools for analysing the untold narratives of Partition beyond the limitations of mainstream cinema.

Digital platforms also facilitate the archiving of oral histories, safeguarding personal testimonies that could otherwise be lost. This democratisation of narrative undermines the hegemonic narratives that have long dominated Partition discourse, making room for alternative narratives and marginalised voices.

In addition, recent filmmakers and scholars have paid greater attention to themes of reconciliation and collective healing. In contrast to early portrayals of Partition, which tended to highlight trauma and loss, recent films investigate cross-border dialogue, nostalgia, and shared cultural heritage. Recent films such as *Khamosh Pani* and *Train to Pakistan* bring to the fore the ongoing entanglement of histories, memories, and identities between Pakistan and India. The emergence of Indo-Pak digital partnerships, cross-border storytelling projects, and Partition survivors' online forums further emphasises the dynamic nature of Partition memory in the digital era.

In conclusion, the cinematic representations of Partition have undergone a significant transformation, reflecting broader shifts in historical consciousness and cultural discourse. From the nationalist grand narratives of early films to the deeply personal and politically charged portrayals in *Garam Hava* and *Tamas*, these cultural texts serve as crucial sites for engaging with Partition's complex legacy. By employing postcolonial theoretical frameworks, this paper has examined how these films construct and contest historical memory, identity, and postcolonial anxieties. Additionally, the influence of digital platforms in reshaping Partition narratives highlights the evolving nature of historical mediation in contemporary times. As new generations engage with Partition through film, literature, and digital media, the event's memory continues to be contested, reimagined, and reinterpreted, shaping the collective identity of South Asia in profound ways.

The Partition of 1947 is still among the most determinant and unfortunate happenings in the history of South Asia, contributing to large-scale violence, displacement, and socio-political disturbances. The experience led to one of the world's biggest involuntary migrations, leaving around fifteen million people displaced and more than a million dead. The cultural and psychological wounds of Partition still imprint the collective memory of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Literature, cinema, and television have been important in narrating this trauma, influencing public awareness, and offering varied visions of its effects. Cinematic portrayals of Partition have shifted from nationalist master narratives to more complex examinations of individual and collective trauma, displacement, and reconciliation.

To gain a better understanding of these representations, it is necessary to examine the symbolic and thematic aspects used in *Garam Hava, Tamas,* and other cultural texts. Space and architecture in *Garam Hava* are used as a metaphor for loss and exclusion. The dilapidated haveli of Salim Mirza's clan is a symbol of the decay of a shared cultural past, bringing to the forefront how ruptures in history make private spaces battlegrounds of belonging. This metaphor of space converges with Henri Lefebvre's idea of "the production of space", where architecture is not only a physical space but an experiential space that mirrors change in sociopolitics.

Additionally, *Garam Hava* is critical of post-Partition nationalism's ideological dogmatism through its illustration of broken familial ties. Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak highlight how the subaltern—who are marginalised by the dominant powers—fail to speak in conventional historical narratives. Salim Mirza's persona represents this condition of the subaltern, being torn between being a loyal subject of his motherland and a constructed identity as a suspect citizen. Spivak's query— "Can the subaltern speak?"—echoes in Salim's silent agony as he internalises systemic exclusion without the freedom to challenge it openly.

The treatment of women in Partition narratives remains a crucial site of critical inquiry. Both *Garam Hava* and *Tamas* highlight the gendered dimensions of displacement and violence, echoing the concerns raised by feminist scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon. The abduction and sexual violence against women during Partition, often erased in official histories, are central to the lived experiences depicted in these films. Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* foregrounds the importance of oral testimonies in capturing women's histories, which remain absent in dominant nationalist discourses. The silencing of female voices in *Tamas*—particularly through the character of Banto, whose suffering remains peripheral—demonstrates the historiographical gaps that feminist scholars seek to address.

Going beyond cinematic images, Partition narratives within modern literature compound the historical record further. Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines and Kamila Shamsie's Kartography question the way Partition continues to influence geopolitics-driven insecurities of our time. The novel by Ghosh uses an incomplete, non-sequential narrative as a reflection of the fragmented memory and the negation of sharp temporal limits the official record wants to impose upon memory. Shamsie's work, however, looks at how trauma is experienced intergenerationally in the political and personal identities of those born decades after 1947.

These literary explorations supplement cinematic representations by broadening the scope of Partition memory beyond direct survivors to their children, showing how historical breaks continue to resonate across generations.

Oral history collections and digital media are increasingly being used to recontextualise Partition histories. Collections like the 1947 Partition Archive and digital storytelling programmes provide a space for survivors and their children to narrate their lives, challenging the powerful state-constructed narratives. Referencing Walter Benjamin's theory of "history as a montage", these disjointed digital accounts build an alternative narrative that defies linear, state-formed histories. In contrast to conventional historiography, which is driven towards coherence and closure, digital archives open up the fractured, contradictory nature of memory, leaving room for multiplicity and conflict.

It is critical to examine how the Partition narrative is invoked in current political rhetoric. Nationalist discourse in India and Pakistan, over the last few years, has weaponised the history of Partition to legitimise exclusionist politics and communal polarisation. An examination of recent films and online media constructions, like *Manto*, demonstrates how Partition continues to be an arena of ideological contestation. The revival of sectarian discourses highlights the lasting significance of the Partition in the determination of national identity and how it is imperative to critically question its representations within various media forms.

In conclusion, the cinematic representation of Partition has played a crucial role in shaping collective memory and national identity, reflecting broader socio-political shifts over time. Initial films tended to tie in with state-led narratives, promoting patriotism and endurance, whereas subsequent representations like *Garam Hava* and *Tamas* took a more complex, humanistic tack, centring on individual trauma, displacement, and postcolonial insecurities. These films break down strict nationalist polarities, laying bare the ambivalences of belonging, exclusion, and historical memory.

By drawing on the theoretical concepts of Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, this research has shown how Partition cinema makes and challenges historical narrative. Anderson's theory of imagined communities explains how Partition ruptured national identities, forcing people to negotiate new affiliations. Said's deconstruction of colonial discourse highlights the long-lasting influence of British policies in constructing communal divisions, while Bhabha's theory of hybridity explains the liminality faced by displaced persons. Through these prisms, film stories become sites of strength and imagination, providing alternative narratives to dominant historical narratives.

The advent of digital media has further broadened the horizon of Partition memory, making it possible for new narratives to challenge state narratives. Online archives, streaming media, and transnational collaborations allow alternative voices, enabling marginalised communities to contribute to the shared memory of Partition. This shift marks a continuous negotiation of identity, where memory is fluid and contested.

The evolution of Partition representations in film and new media serves to highlight the event's persistence as a focal point in South Asian consciousness. With each generation encountering these images, the heritage of Partition remains subject to reimagining and redefinition according to cultural, political, and technological change. Analysing these films confirms the film's function as a vehicle for preserving and recreating historical memory, keeping the Partition an ongoing space of debate and consideration.

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BURNING DOWN THE STEREOTYPES: KANNAKI AND CLEOPATRA AS THE BEACONS OF FEMALE AGENCY

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Abstract

An individual exercises agency when they act independently and make their own choices, allowing them to navigate societal structures and norms. This paper aims to compare and contrast the female agencies portrayed by Cleopatra in the poem *Legend of Cleopatra,* by Geoffrey Chaucer, and Kannaki, the protagonist of the Malayalam movie, *Kannaki,* directed by Jayaraj. The poem *Legend of Cleopatra,* Geoffrey Chaucer taken from the collection of his poems *Legend of Good Women,* features a dream vision or a reinterpretation which explores the story of Antony and Cleopatra, where Cleopatra is portrayed as a strong and loyal woman who sacrifices her life for her beloved, Antony. Similarly, in the movie *Kannaki,* directed by Jayaraj and starring Lal and Nandita Das, Lal depicts the role of Antony as Manickam, and Nandita depicts the role of Cleopatra as Kannaki. Despite their cultural and societal backgrounds, they share a unique unwavering devotion towards their love. In the poem, Cleopatra is depicted as a powerful queen and tragic lover who witnessed the death of her beloved, Antony, and ultimately sealed her fate to death. Kannaki is presented as a divine and strong woman who fights for her love towards Manickam. Delving deep, this paper tries to reveal how both the characters Kannaki and Cleopatra challenge the conventional and societal notion of female agency and feminism.

Keywords: Feminism, Agency, Societal notions, *Legend of Cleopatra, Kannaki*

The word 'agency' was introduced into English from the medieval Latin abstract noun *agentia'* in the mid-1600s, and by the 1670s, it had developed the meaning from *active operation* to *mode of exerting power or producing effect.* It shows the autonomy and the power of women to take their own decisions in their life. In the theory *Gender and Performativity* by Judith Butler, she explores certain roles assigned to women and societal expectations. Numerous writers, especially women writers, have utilised the theme of female agency to explore societal expectations, norms and social stigmas, where they subvert and criticise traditional gender roles that restrict women's opportunities and possibilities to reach a higher realm. They portrayed female characters as strong, independent women or women who strive to be independent, describing their journey towards self-awareness, self-realisation, and sexuality and who try to pursue their goals. Writers like Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, Sylvia Plath, Samuel Richardson and Sojourner Truth had employed female agency as a major theme in many of their works. Writers such as Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen also employed themes of love, marriage, social class, and the importance of character and reputation, social mobility, virtue, and the power of a woman's characters in their earlier works *Pamela, or The Virtue Rewarded,* and *Pride and Prejudice.*

In the novel *Pamela, or The Virtue Rewarded,* Samuel Richardson portrays the autonomy of a lower-class woman by refusing the advantage of her master. Similarly, in the novel *Pride and Prejudice by* Jane Austen, the character Elizabeth refuses to compromise her values. The works of the late 18th and 19th centuries not only focus on strong female characters, but they also showcase female agency or show the importance of women's value and power. Examining the 20th-century novels, female agency can be discerned as a pervasive theme in works such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing,* which collectively illustrate the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of female empowerment and autonomy. In the novel *Surfacing,* by Margaret Atwood, she talks about a woman's discovery of her inner self. Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar,* explores the themes of societal expectation, mental illness, identity and the struggle for agency or autonomy, describing the story of Esther Greenwood, who descends into depression while struggling in the vicious web of society. In *Mrs Dalloway,* Virginia Woolf explores female agency through Clarissa's decision-making and choices in life. *The Bluest Eye,* by Toni Morrison, delves into a powerful exploration of female agency, examining how Black women navigate a society that persistently devalues them. Similarly, *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing,* an autobiography by Maya Angelou, depicts a story of a girl who struggles to overcome the constraints in a prejudiced society.

"*You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide*

not to be reduced by them." (*Letter to My Daughter*)

Female independence has been powerfully portrayed not only in literature but also in movies as well. The Mollywood movie *Great Indian Kitchen,* directed by Joe Baby, revolves around a newlywed woman who struggles with a patriarchal family.

The story shed light on oppression faced by women in Indian households; after being subjected to drudgery, the protagonist finally finds the courage to break the patriarchal norms. Similarly, in Bollywood cinema, *Gunjan Saxena, or The Kargil Girl,* directed by Sharan Sharma, tells the story of Gunjan, who breaks away from the traditional expectations of women in Indian society by pursuing a career in the Indian Air Force.

Mahanati, a Tollywood movie directed by Nag Ashwin, is also biographical, which tells the story of Savitri, the legendary actress who defied societal norms and expectations and found her own space in the film industry. Not only in Indian cinemas but Hollywood also represented women as the ones who strongly show their independence and fight for their agency. *Hidden Figures*, by Theodore Melfi, is a powerful portrayal of female agency, featuring three African American women who break the stereotypes in a male-dominated society.

 Characters that employ female agency portray women in three different ways: a rebel, the one who resists or breaks the barriers; a survivor, who overcomes the obstacles and becomes successful (Maya Angelou is one among them); and a leader, who asserts their agency. The characters of Kannaki and Cleopatra resemble each other, the leaders who assert their autonomy against the male-dominated society. In *Legend of Cleopatra*, taken from *Legend of Good Women,* a collection of poems by *Chaucer,* he presents Cleopatra as a virtuous woman who has control over her destiny and as the one who has the power to make decisions in her personal and political life. In the course of an androcentric era, she has an independent force to shape her own legacy and destiny by ascending the throne of Egypt after the death of Ptolemy. Later, as the story progresses, Mark Antony, a senator from Rome, comes to Egypt in order to capture the place. Both Cleopatra and Antony instantly fell in love with each other while he was already betrothed to Caesar's sister, Octavia. In due course, Caesar learns about the same and declares war against Egypt, building a strong army against Antony. In the battle, Antony eventually gets conquered by Caesar and his army and stabs himself to death due to humiliation and loss of power. Devastated by the sudden loss of her beloved, Cleopatra decides to end her life as well. She embellishes the shrine of Antony with all the available gems and stones of Egypt and digs a pit beside his grave. Filling the pit with the venomous snakes, all naked and with a good heart, she leaped into it. Chaucer portrays Cleopatra as a woman of her word who chooses to end her life along with her lover as she faces a backlash when fate decides to take a toll on her.

Jayaraj's *Kannaki* is a cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* and also influenced by *Cilappatikāram*, an epic poem by IlangoAdigal*,* where Kannaki is a powerful mythical figure. *Kannaki* is the second adaptation of Shakespeare's plays by Jayaraj, the first being the movie *Kaliyattam* starring Suresh Gopi and Manju Warrier; he interweaves the soul of Cleopatra in Kannaki. The principal characters of the movie *Kannaki* are Manikyam, Choman, Gounder, Kaliyappan, Kumudam and Kanakam, where the character Kannaki is played by Nandita Das and the character Manikyam is played by Lal, who is depicted as equivalent to Antony and Cleopatra. Jayaraj changes the setting and war field from his adapted work to a village and cockpits, where they raise cocks for fight, for earning their livelihood, where each cock represents their masters, Manikyam, Choman, and Gounder. In the course of time, Manikyam and Kannaki fall in love with each other. Learning the same, Choman fears losing Manikyam and decides to fix the marriage of his sister Kumudam and Manikyam, which leads to more miscommunications. As the story develops, Manikyam goes in search of Kannaki, leaving Kumudam and Choman, while Gounder bribes Kanakam, a local fortune teller, and tries to separate Choman, Manikyam, and Kannaki by spreading erroneous assumptions about Kumudam being pregnant with Manikyam's child to Kannaki, which leads to brewing a conflict between Kannaki and Manikyam. Later, Manikyam defeats Choman in a cockfight, and their disputes come to an end. Afterwards, when Manikyam learns about Kannaki leaving her hometown, he engages in a fight with one of his cocks and commits suicide. Wrecked by Manikyam's death, Kannaki lets out a loud wail and cry before allowing a venomous snake to bite on her neck and sacrifices her life for her love, dying beside Manikyam.

Bringing Cleopatra from *Legend of Cleopatra* and Kannaki from Jayaraj's film *Kannaki* to the forefront, one can observe copious similarities despite their varying cultures and historic backgrounds. One of the prime resemblances they share is female agency, where they have their own opinions and choices, either on the political disputes or in their personal lives. Rejecting the societal norms and expectations, they forged their own paths and stood for themselves even in the adverse conditions in life. Both the characters experience the loss of love, in which fate played a major role. Symbolising the powerful aspects of womanhood, love, beauty and fury, they established themselves as the formidable forces of their own realms, Cleopatra by ruling Egypt under her iron fist. Both the characters, by living an independent life even in a hostile society, have an irresistible allure which captivates the men around them. Chaucer portrays Cleopatra as a strong, independent woman, whereas Kannaki is portrayed as a divine entity, where people came to cure their snake bites. They regard her as a goddess and address her as 'Kannaki Amma', showing their respect and love towards her.

Often in South India, especially in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, people refer to or address Goddesses and mothers as 'Amma', showing immense devotion and respect, where Goddesses are given equal footing as maternal figures, flaunting the power of each and every woman as a mother. Likewise, Kannaki is also considered a goddess or a maternal figure who can cure or who is believed to be able to cure snake venom. Through the lenses of society, Cleopatra and Kannaki are viewed as women who lack societal values and have loose character, while making wrong interpretations about them. Cleopatra is often portrayed as a woman who played with the emotions of multiple men, tangling their hearts in the web of her charisma, even if she is the powerful and virtuous queen of Egypt.

Meanwhile, Kannaki is depicted as a character whom men approached out of lust and desire, mooching around her to get a single look from her. They are the women who challenge the system around them through the power they assert on their own lives as well as on their surroundings.

Kannaki, directed by Jayaraj, could be taken as the modern adaptation of the Legend of Cleopatra by Chaucer, where the characters Kannaki and Cleopatra are poles apart in numerous facets, such as historical and cultural background, along with the way the story is narrated. Cleopatra is a historical figure who has her charm, political intelligence and seductive nature, whereas Kannaki is from a rural village and engaged in cultural rituals and curing snake venom. In contrast, Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen, becomes the pastoral charm of Chemmanampathy, Kannaki, who fell in love with a cockfighter, whereas Cleopatra was in love with a married man. Cleopatra is often depicted as a cunning enchantress who emerges as a powerful and unbeatable ruler, who demonstrates remarkable agency, navigating the realms of politics, culture and diplomacy, while Kannaki is depicted as a goddess where she demonstrates significant agency in taking her own decision despite her social norms or pressures.

Mythically, Cleopatra is strongly related to Egyptian religious beliefs, explicitly recognised as Goddess Isis, the Goddess of Motherhood and patroness of nature and magic. In the temple Dendera, one can see rare images of Cleopatra depicting herself as Hathor. In southern culture, Kannaki is portrayed as a woman who attained divine powers. In different states of Southern India, Kannaki is worshipped as Kannaki Amma, Attukal Amma, and Kodungaloor Amma; in all these, she is worshipped as a chaste, just woman and as a female power.

On the other hand, while Kannaki is already considered a powerful figure and a goddess, Cleopatra is considered a licentious queen: *Then follows Cleopatra, lustful queen* (Dante 29). Even in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante portrays Cleopatra as a lustful queen who is being punished in the second circle of Hell, otherwise known as the circle of lust, where libidinous souls are being punished. In the epic poem *Cilappatikāram,* thecharacter Kannaki seeks justice for her husband Kovalan's biased and sudden execution by the King, accusing him of theft. She curses Madhura out of anger as she tears off her breast and throws it in its direction, cursing for the damnation of the city. But Cleopatra is often considered as a woman who is promiscuous. The reason why these women are objectified is because of the fact that these mythical stories are recited or handed over to the coming generation, probably by men or women who support patriarchy or are conditioned to support patriarchy.

> The notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate (Foucault 155).

According to Michel Foucault, Power was seen as something that enabled and supported sexuality. However, with the arrival of the concept of sex, the relationship between power and sexuality was turned over. Foucault argues that the idea of sex created a new narrative where sexuality is considered as a primal, buoyant energy that power struggles to manage. In the case of Cleopatra when sex is interwoven with power, she is often depicted as a powerful iconic figure, who flaunts her flaws and vulnerabilities, whenever the name of Cleopatra comes into the context her negative side is highlighted more than the power she held. Paradoxically, Kannaki is often portrayed as Goddess, exhibits the human side as she engages in the deceitful means for the love of Manikyam by obeying fortune teller's advice. Even after this harsh generalisation and spotlighting of the negative traits, these women, Kannaki and Cleopatra thrived and executed power and asserted their places in the world. Even in this 21st century, where women find barriers to take independent decisions and to make their own alternatives. They continue to face subjugations and institutional inequalities, beginning from their families to the work places, women still experience discriminations and oppression. But both these characters Cleopatra and Kannaki are represented as a beacon of female agency, where they have a strong character and power to stand for their love and to take own their decisions. They are the women who challenges the system around them, in a society where women have no rights and no values. these women are a role model which shows despite what the situation is, the greatest achievement or power of a woman is to be bold and to stay put to their decision and do what they want. Here Kanaki and Cleopatra, throughout the expanse showcases a female power, which at the end was defeated by fate.

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SOCIAL MEDIA'S LITERARY REVOLUTION: HOW BOOKSTAGRAM IS REDEFINING READING HABITS AND GENRE POPULARITY

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Abstract

Reading clubs and literary communities have always been a part of society. The Bookstagram[1] that exists today is a modern evolution of that culture, providing a space for the readers to thrive in. While reading was stereotyped as a characteristic of "nerds" until fairly recently, it has now become trendy, even associated with aesthetic appeal. Several factors have contributed to this shift in perception, Bookstagram being one major factor of them all. With the rise of Bookstagram, there's also been a significant rise in the preference for particular genres, such as romance, fantasy, and thrillers. This paper attempts to study how the social media trends have influenced reading habits and literary preferences. Additionally, it examines how nowadays, books are being marketed more as aesthetic products, rather than literary works. With this sudden expansion in the reading community, there's also a new concern of "what is worth reading?" The overwhelming availability of literature across diverse genres has made this question more relevant than ever. Moreover, given the persistent stereotypes and criticism directed at genres like romance and fantasy, it is essential to reconsider who has the authority to define "good" literature. This paper delves into this issue of literary elitism in the digital age. Like romance and fantasy, it is essential to reconsider who has the authority to define "good" literature. This paper delves into this issue of literary elitism in the digital age.

Keywords: Bookstagram, literary preferences, literary elitism, reading trends

Introduction

People have been discussing books for as long as books have existed. However, the exact moment when people began to meet up, to discuss, or bond over books that they read is another question altogether – one which can't really be pinpointed in history. However, Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), one of America's earliest feminists and spiritual leaders in colonial Massachusetts, can be considered one of the first to start a book club as early as 1634. Hutchinson examined and discussed weekly sermons with other women in these sessions. And it was for this[2] and her nonconformity to, and her critique of, the prevalent religious doctrines that she was charged with heresy and sedition, ultimately resulting in her exile from Massachusetts.

Throughout history, reading clubs and literary communities have existed in various forms. What might have initially started as gatherings to discuss, interpret, and understand religious texts has gradually evolved today into several online reading communities, such as Bookstagram, BookTok[3], BookTube[4], etc. This paper focuses specifically on Bookstagram, with a focus on the romance genre. What started as a mere hashtag in 2011 has turned into this vast online community of literature enthusiasts, with over 115 million posts (number of posts retrieved from Instagram on 8th March, 2025). It has evolved into this space for readers where they find a sense of belonging. Feneberger (2017) describes Bookstagram as "the community of book-loving users on Instagram" (para. 2), while Ruiz (2015) describes it as a space where "Instagram's bookworms congregate" (para. 5).

Until recently, reading was stereotyped as a characteristic of "nerds", but in recent years, it has gained popularity and become trendy. Even people who are not particularly fond of reading post books and book-related posts on their Instagram account just for their aesthetic appeal. Several factors have played a role in this shift in perception. Bookstagramand the easy availability of books of all sorts of genres and lengths are two major factors of them all. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a notable increase in people's engagement with Bookstagram. Not being able to partake in real-life communities, several people turned to online communities, such as online gaming clubs, Foodstagram[5], Bookstagram, etc.

With the rise of Bookstagram, there's also been a significant rise in the preference for particular genres, such as romance, fantasy, dark romance, etc. However, alongside this surge in popularity, there's also been a rise in the already existent stigma around these genres. A key reason for this stigma is the predominantly female presence in the Bookstagram community. And as history is evidence, anything that's been liked or dominated majorly by women has been often dismissed as weak, frivolous, and insignificant – whether it be the romance genre or even artists like Taylor Swift, BTS, and One Direction. Flanagan (2022) interviewed a bookstagrammer, and when asked about the gender disparity when it comes to reading, she replied,

When it comes to reading, I think there's definitely gendered expectations...from school days reading is treated more as a girl's thing. The girls read more than boys and some people socialise their children.

So it's like, the boys can go and play sports and they can go out of the house, and rough and tumble and it is perfectly okay for a girl to just sit at home in quiet solitude and read a book. And I think that definitely shapes the relationship that men and women have with books. (p. 42)

This gives an insight into why Bookstagram, and reading communities in general, are so heavily women dominated.

Discussion and Analysis

Influence of Bookstagram on Reading Habits, and Literary Preferences

In her 2017 Guardian article, Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd talks about how romance as a genre has been dismissed as "sentimental, sappy and trashy". It is remarkable how, in spite of this stereotypical perception of the genre, romance books continue to dominate bestseller lists and remain one of the most popular genres among readers. Bookstagram has created this space for readers where they feel allowed to read whatever they want to without hesitation or judgement. Within Bookstagram, there are even communities dedicated to dark fantasy and various other literary and romance tropes.

"Hoover's *It Ends with Us* wasn't an overnight success and didn't have the popularity it has currently until the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, *It Ends with Us* became a viral hit in online bookish communities like #BookTok and Bookstagram" (Wiseman, 2024, p. 16). Social media platforms like Bookstagram, BookTok, and BookTube hold significant influence, and their trends are not limited just to the online spaces; these trends extend to impact the real world as well. For instance, the popularity of *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara was heavily influenced by Bookstagram trends. People are generally reluctant to read long books. Yet, A Little Life witnessed such hype on Bookstagram that it led to so many people diving into and reading this 700+ page book, whose main selling factor was how it dished out trauma and abuse, masking it into a so-called narrative of four friends dealing with life together and privately. Observer called the book "Devastating", while the Evening Standard wrote that the truths this book tells are "wrenching, permanent" (Yanagihara, 2016, cover). There was a trend in which readers shared videos of themselves bawling their eyes out, with A Little Life in their hands, suggesting that the novel was too devastatingly heartbreaking.

How Bookstagram Blends Literature and Visual Art

Bookstagram often tends to portray books as aesthetic objects rather than literary works. Bookstagrammers use evocative backdrops and props to make their posts appear aesthetic and to align with the book's theme, or with their perception of the book, at least. This deliberate aestheticisation is often dismissed as empty displays, labelling it as mere self-indulgence for attention seekers. However, Thomas (2021) contends that this aestheticization "... offers a way for readers to share acts of reading with others in a way that evokes the sensory and the sensual" (p. 3).

> Across the web and social media, users engage in various kinds of curatorial activity involving books, for example creating virtual bookshelves for their reading (Library Thing), or creating book related objects and artefacts on virtual pin boards (Pinterest). ... According to Rodger (2019), such practices have been associated with a renaissance in a 'bookish' aesthetic, but can also be understood as giving physical expression to readerly urges and desires, and as illustrating the myriad ways in which readers' bodily selves interact with the material form of the book as an intersensory object. (Thomas, 2021, p. 3)

Instagram is primarily a visual platform to share photos on, and Bookstagram has incorporated books into this platform and given the Bookstagrammers a space not just to record the books that they read or to talk about the books that they want to talk about. But it also gives them ways to curate, share and display their readings in a way that reflects their personality. The aestheticisation of Bookstagram does not just beautify the feed; it adds character and depth, giving it a unique sense of identity. Bookstagram goes way beyond just talking about books, encompassing fan arts, fan edits, fandoms centred around their favourite books, authors, or characters even, and much more.

Bookstagram, Wattpad, and the (much needed) End of Literary Elitism

What is worth reading? And who decides that? These questions have existed dauntingly throughout generations, one which has never been answered to everyone's satisfaction. Just as there was a sudden rise in literature with the advent of the printing press in 1476, leading to the Renaissance, something similar is happening now that there are digital modes of access to literature, which are only growing in number every day. With this sudden rise in the availability of literature of all sorts of genres and lengths, there grows a vacuum of indecisiveness and uncertainty as to what to read and what is worth spending time on. And that is where Bookstagram comes into play.

Though book reviewers and critics have always existed in one form or the other, Bookstagram is unique in that it does not preach. It acts more like a close acquaintance or even a friend who is sensitive and considerate in their recommendations. But then again, with such an abundance of all types of literature available at your fingertips, there comes the relevant question of what to read and what not to. With popular reading platforms readily available online like Wattpad and such, which come with their own stereotypes of being frivolous, dramatic and of no literary merit, it is imperative to reconsider exactly who has the authority to define "good" literature.

The answer, I think, is no one. No one person can decide what "good" literature is. They can decide for themselves; everyone has that much autonomy, and if not, they should have at least the autonomy to decide what they want to read and what is good for them, what is intellectually stimulating for them, and what is a mere pastime. It is even very infantilising and condescending to preach to adults about how romance as a genre or Wattpad as a platform is of no use and that they do not have that high a literary value. Of course, the readers know that, at least most of them do. Those who engage in Wattpad stories or Bookstagram recommendations are not necessarily seeking intellectually rigorous material – they may simply want something light, relatable, or even fantastical, offering an escape from reality. This does not, in any way, indicate any ignorance among these readers.

Saying that reading such books is intellectually and socially harmful to their readers, as it sets unrealistic expectations among them, is absurd. Morally censoring grown adults on what they read is absurd. If concerns about the kind of content on Wattpad and Bookstagramexist, then the focus should be on educating people and regulating the access to the content based on age, not attacking the whole platform, which is a comfort to and a space for readers and writers as well, to interact and connect with people on their shared love for reading. Literary elitism is very outdated and increasingly looked down upon.

Conclusion

What started as a hashtag in 2011 has now evolved into a global community of readers and writers bonding over their shared passion for books. Bookstagram has become one of the go-to platforms for readers to search for book recommendations, book reviews, or indulge in fan arts, fan edits, or even to get literature-themed merchandise or even merchandise related to their specific fandoms. Bookstagram's influence now extends beyond casual discussions, influencing book sales and public opinion on various titles. Recognising its impact, authors and publishers have started leveraging Bookstagram's reach, with many organising "Bookstagram Tours" as part of their promotional strategies when launching new books.

Some people try to "appropriate" Bookstagram by posting selfies with books, sharing random quotes, or just donning the book aesthetic to make their personality appear deeper and more intellectual and whatnot – despite rarely reading beyond their academic requirements. These posts often come across as superficial and shallow, and they reek of ignorance and entitlement. It is because of such pretenders that genuine Bookstagrammers, who try to curate and post aesthetically pleasing book-related content, are labelled as self-indulgent narcissists when, in reality, they are only putting in effort and trying to use Instagram like the visual platform that it is to express their love for books and reading while simultaneously giving their followers a glimpse into them as a person.

Stereotypes have always existed around the romance genre and platforms that are primarily dominated by romance, such as Wattpad. Despite this, romance has been a much sought-after genre since time immemorial. What Bookstagram has done is not completely de-stereotype the genres (which may not even be entirely possible) but instil the confidence and, in a way, "allow" the readers to read and claim the genre unapologetically. Bookstagram gives the readers and the writers the

> … opportunity to interact with new knowledge about the field, such as literary genres and sources of inspiration, as well as opportunities to purchase lesser-known books, whether fiction, nonfiction or poetry published by active community members. Therefore, Bookstagram is not limited to just photos, but it also starts discussions, intrigues challenges, shares recommendations and reviews, and strengthens the sense of support for the digital space created. (Obreja, 2024, p. 113)

Notes

[1] A portmanteau of words Books and Instagram.

[2] "Participants listened raptly as" Hutchinson provided "scriptural analysis and commentary on the sermons of the ministers. Women could repeat the content of sermons but were not supposed to comment on them." (Bill of Rights Institute, 2021)

[3] A portmanteau of words Books and TikTok.

[4] A Portmanteau of words Books and YouTube.

5 A portmanteau of words Food and Instagram.

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TRAPPED AND DRIVEN BY IMAGES: A CLOSE READING OF "THE GREAT UPROOTING: MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT IN AN AGE OF PLANETARY CRISIS" BY AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

The culture of social media and virtual reality in the modern world now can be considered as having a life of its own. It is a life built out of curated images, sounds and experiences that passes on to its viewers an experience and a shared belief that there is something good and highly intriguing within this virtual world. The problem with this is that the contents within virtual reality are only a curated likeness of reality and not reality in its true sense; all the while, social media algorithms only strengthen the web within which viewers are often entwined. This paper aims to take on a close reading into Amitav Ghosh's essay "The Great Uprooting: Migration and Displacement in an Age of Planetary Crisis"to understand the powerful yet invisible psychological impacts of the spectacle of social media that convinces a lot of people from third world countries to migrate, even if it cost them their life, to western continents or countries if they are to consider themselves successful. To read into the deeper aspects of the spectacle of social media and its imitation of the sublime that eventually grows to have a significant impact on the psychological decisions of its viewers.

Keywords - Migration, Acceleration, Modernity, Virtual reality, Social media, Network spectacle, Achievement Society, Imperialism.

Introduction

The current flow of modern life functions around an ever-prevalent social media presence, we are surrounded by images, sounds and ideas that reach us, filtered and catered to our liking, from a void of virtually calculated algorithms almost taking up the place of interactions with fellow human beings and feeding the consumer's mind with necessary human emotions of fulfillment that had, in the past, come from people's interaction with reality. Sensory perception is now bombarded with stimuli that does not originate from natural life and natural interaction but from our machines, our gadgets. Human beings as sensory creatures who make sense of our life from what we perceive with our senses cannot help but create the image of our identity from what we interact with every day; the tactile and auditory images from our gadgets now play a big part in creating a sense of self in a person. Western imperialism has had the entire world pulled into a state of consumerism where modern man's existence revolves around making money with which to buy (consume) products, the majority of which are products created out of the western consumerist ideology. However, with the birth of social media the objects we consume are taking on different shapes.

In the place of capital, the spectacle is the social relation between people- not mediated by commodities or money, but by images. The images are autonomous insofar as they exist separately from the commodities they refer to (Fauchner 111).

The spectacle mentioned here is the spectacle of virtual reality, the thing of which we are its unremitting spectators. The things we consume now consist not only of physical objects from the market but of things that move and shape our desire and sense of self. Amitav Ghosh's essay deals with this different and less chartered aspect as to why people choose to migrate to first world countries. The initial and common perspective we have of mass migration is that people migrate as a result of war, poverty or natural calamities posed by climate disruptions. Ghosh poses the perspective that there is a much more insidious and pervasive element, one that is not as apparent as the others and that is the desire to migrate to first world countries that seem to have a "better life" as manufactured from people's interaction with virtual images and narratives. 'A better life is elsewhere and not here' is an emotional conclusion that many of the immigrants seem to have. Just like the mass manufacturing of objects and materials, emotions and desires have become hijacked to create a proliferation of a common desire, one that is disproportionate to the lived reality around us. "…such is the power of social media that it has ensured that no one, anywhere, is excluded from these desires" (Ghosh 10).

Ghosh argues against the common image of teenagers immersed in virtual reality as presented in popular culture as only limited to teenagers from technologically advanced countries. He shows that within this perspective there is a direct implication that the youth from third world countries are considered to not have as strong an immersion into social media.

"In India and in many other poor countries, there are large numbers of people whose virtual abilities are completely disproportionate to their formal education and circumstances" (Ghosh 11) we often draw the conclusion that lower educational and financial possibilities also mean a lower interaction with the

"cognitive assemblage" (Ghosh 12) of virtual reality and its impact on their consciousness. However, Ghosh states that this vast disproportion could have an even greater impact on consciousness.

If the images of virtual reality create an emotional reaction where the observer mentally concludes that there is a better life elsewhere then the vast disproportion only becomes a very vast space for projecting a sense of lack. Desire is proportionate to the extent or vastness of 'perceived lack', and with the social media spectacle images created out of western ideology fills that gap.

"The Great Uprooting" that Ghosh refers to is not just limited to the physical uprooting of a people from one nation to another but also a psychological uprooting that begins way before people decide to migrate. The consumers of social media persistently consume ideology in the form of images that are inevitably images created within western narratives, and inevitably there is born a mental detachment from the reality that surrounds them and western images on social media become the objects of desire.

> No wonder then that cell phones have become iconic of the present wave of migration in the same way that bundles and battered suitcases were in earlier times. Far from expanding the distance between poor and rich countries, in certain very important respects information technology has shrunk that gulf (Ghosh 13).

If "bundles and battered" suitcases indicate a means of survival for migrants of the past, then a proliferation of cellphones indicate that they are now the means of survival; an ever-present force shaping decisions, journeys and destinations and people become "subordinate to the aims of the network spectacle" that drives decisions with "a veil of optimism, novelty and stimulus" (Fauchner 110).

This "uprooting" is a detachment from their own lives, and the beauty that could be created from their own native surroundings. The veil of the "network spectacle" (Fauchner 110) creates and disseminates a common desire that beauty is elsewhere and not here. Ghosh presents us with a significant perspective that shines a light on a very significant psychological impact of virtual reality but one that is not immediately obvious. Information technology has become such a prevalent aspect of human life that it has attained a powerful invisibility (Latour) the very fact that virtual reality is not usually considered a determinant of human uprooting only elaborates its power; it is a thing so normalized as a part of human consciousness that its effects are difficult to understand.

Images that are representations of reality within that virtual space that creates an illusion of the sublime has an effect that renders ground reality uninteresting (Fauchner). There is now an impoverished perspective of the reality that people live in whereby those who decide to migrate, apart from those who migrate due to war or natural calamities, do so because at some point they have come to associate poverty, deprivation and backwardness with their native lands. While success, merit and abundance are associated with the western world and the western way of life only.

> Since childhood, the most attractive images that they had beheld were not of the rivers and fields that surrounded them but of objects like these. And the cravings stoked by these images has inducted into them a global citizenry of desire (Ghosh 24).

The majority of the content that people interact with on social media are the result/creation of images of western consumer values; it is western capitalistic ideologies materialized into images and objects that creates the urge that people 'must' experience them if they are to consider themselves successful or rather, to even consider themselves as a part of the world. With virtual reality Western Imperialism now has an all-pervasive portal through which to bend and colonize people even beyond its own understanding or capacity.

The fetishization of commodities is a strong determinant of emotional uprooting as it places desire outside of its own surroundings; it displaces desire. This longing for a better life elsewhere is no longer rooted in any reality as western images and the expectation that it creates are also not rooted in any reality. "By representing themselves as leisurely individuals, social media users engage in an emulative exercise of reproducing situations that may not accord with offline reality" (Fauchner 130).

There is only a hyperreal experience of western life that is created from the viewers own fantasy and desire. The algorithm of social media is only a projection, a representation of the various layers of the same desire, the same emotion, the same longing regenerating itself over and over again. The observer of this social media spectacle (Faucher) eventually experiences what Byung Chul Han calls "excessive self-reference", a misplaced interaction with the "other" that is non-existent. The 'other' within literature and psychology is anything that is different from the self, it is a paradoxical relationship where the 'self' sustains and develops its sense of self from its acceptance, negation or any interaction with the other.

The 'other' in the context of virtual reality is a façade, "the real has been condemned to a proliferation of signs and their exchange that seem to operate in a world governed by illusion" (Fauchner 113) it mimics human interaction generated by a reflection of our own desire with which the viewer interacts with over

and over again until breaking point and this breaking point comes at a great price, "…for it was only upon arriving in Europe that it had dawned on many of them that they were the victims of a fantasy; their dreams of a life like that of people in advertisements were no more likely to be fulfilled in Italy than in the countries they had left behind" (Ghosh 24).

Acceleration and Mimicking Achievement.

Byung Chul Han in his work The Burnout Society presents a new and necessary perspective of society that revolves around persistent achievement and acceleration. He states that, "Twenty-first-century is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society" (Han 8) where society no longer limits what it is that people are allowed or not allowed to do but a society where people are faced with "unlimited Can" (Han 8). The achievement society inflicts a new bondage upon people with the illusion of unlimited possibilities implying that young men and women "can" achieve whatever it is they want and not being able to do so indicates failure.

"Disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminal. In contrast. Achievement society creates depressives and losers" (Han 9) Ghosh's essay reveals how a lot of those who finally reach Europe, those who make it into the immigrant camps often feel a severe drop in their mental states. The rush of taking on the journey, once it is finished, does not persist. Social media creates a sense of rush that pushes and drives people to take on dangerous journeys to attain their desire, it creates the idea that people are to take part or mimic this acceleration but once this destination is reached the sense of rush hardly persists once it is met with reality. The sudden understanding that being in Europe does not immediately mean their positions are accelerated and that their desire is only a result of mimicry "All desire is potentially a source of conflict, especially when the desire is for something intangible and perhaps illusory" (The Scapegoating Machine) The realization that this manufactured desire is only an illusion inevitably lands the migrants into a very vast emptiness.

> No wonder then that many of them say that the worst part of the journey consists not of their time on the road or at sea, but rather of the months and years spend languishing in European migrant camps. In those camps there is nothing to do but wait and sleep: it is little consolation that you are fed and housed and given allowances; it is the waiting and the idleness that break the spirit (Ghosh 21).

The rush and pull of the journey is over and the mental dip that people often experience in immigrant camps can be understood as the depression that Han says is born out of the achievement subject whose desire to achieve is born out of "Unlimited *Can*" (Han 8) the façade of limitless possibilities regresses the individual into an entity persistently performing for the 'idea' of limitlessness. So, when that journey is abruptly over it is only a sense of helplessness that is left.

"The Great Uprooting: Migration and Displacement in an Age of Planetary Crisis" reveals the deep conflict that is born in minds of immigrants as they decide to migrate. As social media creates an illusion of success that they feel they must achieve, "What they saw of Europe on the net was shaped by their own expectations and the feedback they got from the social networks" (Ghosh 15) this social network also consists of images of the few immigrants who have achieved the success of settling down and taking part in the western narrative of things and to not achieve the same is a serious emotional burden for those who feel inclined. The migrants who decide to take on this journey out of their interaction with the network spectacle give themselves up to the slavery of "Unlimited *Can*" (Han 8).

> This is where the interactive aspect of the cyber world becomes crucial. It is widely acknowledged that the information provided to us by the internet and social media is to a large extent shaped by our own desire, presuppositions and networks……. they ended up seeing what they wanted to see. In effect they, like so many of us, are victims of wish-fulfillment fantasies based on 'fake-news' (Ghosh 14-15).

Western Imperialism and Migration

Migration has always been a consistent part of human history and the migration of people today closely resembles the migration of slaves and indentured workers from African and Asian countries to the west to be used for economic expansion as "…it was the desires and the appetites of the metropolis that moved people between continents… In this dispensation, slaves and coolies were producers, not consumer; they could never aspire to the desires of their masters." (Ghosh 24)

But the great metamorphosis of modern-day migration of people, although their journeys are similar, is that their reasons for crossing over are not of the same premise. Those who migrate to western countries do so with the dream that they will take part and have a share of the western consumer's table; they migrate not to become just puppets in the machine but to become like the masters themselves.

The image of success and merit proudly paraded by the West has taken a different turn on different people. The relationship between the state and its migrants have also changed drastically. The persons

of slaves and indentured workers were thoroughly checked and recorded, everything about their existence was known and controlled by the state, but Ghosh states that today this old system has become an entity with a life of its own, completely out of state control. Western countries no longer have a hold on the people coming into its shores.

The old colonial system of transporting people now has what Ghosh terms as "escape velocity" (Ghosh 27) where the old system of "violent demographic intervention" (Ghosh 27) in the form of colonialism still exists but in a way that escapes the control and power of the state. This does not make the struggle and horror of migration routes any lesser, nor does it necessarily give power to the migrants. It simply has taken a different turn with very modern and pervasive and ambiguous forces behind migration. Ghosh reiterates that it is "relentless acceleration in processes of production, consumption and distribution" (Ghosh 26) that has led to this phenomenon and the common reaction from Western politics is to either build a wall (right wing) to keep out immigrants or to create 'growth' (left wing) in poor countries that would keep them from migrating, but these two perspectives are hardly remedies for the core issue, because the truth is that "in a digitally interconnected world, growth can itself be a factor that motivates people to move by broadening their desires and aspirations" (Ghosh 26) and no wall will keep out or keep in the ideologies and narratives that drive relentless acceleration. The currents narratives we have within consumer society, the desire to grow and consume "presents Europe with a mirror in which to see the unravelling of some of its most important institutions and projects" (Ghosh 27)

Conclusion

Ghosh challenges the image of migration that the general public has, of it being "primitive or atavistic" (25) consisting of a people that have not really joined the modern world yet, or of a people who have been sent back into pre-modernity as a result of war or climate disruptions. While these factors are also true of migration, it is also the very same paradigms of modernity where "the drive to maximize production inhabits the *social unconscious*" (Han 9) has led to these results. It is the very paradigms of modernity with its limiting and distorted view of growth that breed these aspects that seem anti-modern, at the same time it is these 'disjunctions' in modernity that truly reveals its effects.

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THE INDIAN ODYSSEY: STORYTELLING AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract

Storytelling is a popular art form in India with a rich cultural heritage that dates back to ancient times. From the epic tales of *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* to the folk tales of the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* stories, India has a vibrant tradition of storytelling. The paper seeks to study the art of storytelling on three levels: the oral tradition, the painted and performed, and the written one.

The art of storytelling in India has its roots in ancient times, with the epics of *The Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata* being two of the most famous stories in Indian mythology. These epics, which date back to the 4th century BCE, were passed down through oral traditions, with storytellers travelling from village to village, sharing these stories with audiences. The Puranas, a collection of ancient Hindu texts, also contain stories and legends that have been passed down through generations. During the mediaeval period, the Bhakti movement, which emphasised devotion and love for God, led to the development of a new form of storytelling in India. Bhakti poets and saints, such as Kabir and Mirabai, used storytelling as a means of conveying spiritual messages and teachings. Sufi storytelling, which originated in the Middle East and spread to India, also became popular during this period. Sufi storytellers like Amir Khusrau used stories and anecdotes to convey spiritual and mystical teachings. Storytelling in modern India takes many forms, including oral traditions, written texts, and visual media. Oral storytelling is a popular tradition in India, with stories being passed down through generations. The *Katha* tradition, which involves the telling of stories from Hindu mythology, is a popular form of oral storytelling in India. Written texts, such as novels and short stories, are also a popular form of storytelling in India. Indian authors, such as Rabindranath Tagore and R.K. Narayan, have made significant contributions to world literature. For the written tradition, in this paper we would study the narratology of Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* and *India: A Fable*.

Keywords: The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, The Puranas, Kanthapura

Storytelling is probably the oldest form of art in India, with a rich and diverse heritage that spans thousands of years. Some tell stories, some weave stories, and some write stories. Some take us to fairylands, some give lessons, and some relate life in all its colours. Whatever they are, one thing that almost every storyteller does is to plant the seeds of imagination in the audience. These seeds in turn germinate to give birth to more storytellers who come around with a kaleidoscope for the listeners.

The art of storytelling in India has its roots in ancient times, with the epics of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* being two of the most famous stories in Indian mythology. These epics, which date back to the 4th century BCE, were passed down through oral traditions, with storytellers travelling from village to village, sharing these stories with audiences. These verbal traditions, handed down from generation to generation, have helped shape and keep India's unique identity alive. *ThePuranas*, a collection of ancient Hindu texts, also contain stories and legends that have been passed down through generations. During the mediaeval period, the Bhakti movement, which emphasised devotion and love for God, led to the development of a new form of storytelling in India. Bhakti poets and saints, such as Kabir and Mirabai, used storytelling as a means of conveying spiritual messages and teachings. Sufi storytelling, which originated in the Middle East and spread to India, also became popular during this period. Sufi storytellers, such as Amir Khusrau, used stories and anecdotes to convey spiritual and mystical teachings. *Dāstāngoī*, an Indo-Persian storytelling art, flourished in Mughal courts. *Dāstāngos* mesmerised audiences with tales of heroism and magic, a tradition now experiencing a revival. Storytelling in modern India takes many forms, including oral traditions, written texts, and visual media.

Speaking of oral storytelling, what flashes immediately is a scene where a grandparent tells stories to grandchildren. Stories that echo mythology and take the little mind on a journey to places he paints in his mind. Then we have the *Katha* tradition, which involves the telling of stories from Hindu mythology and is another popular form of oral storytelling in India. Furthermore, oral traditions encompass a wide range of genres, including folklore, epics, ballads, chants, and proverbs, each serving as a repository of cultural norms, historical events, and ethical teachings. One of the most celebrated forms, *Harikatha*, popular in *South India,* blends music, narration, and philosophy, while *Burra Katha* of *Telangana* takes a more interactive approach with humour and commentary.

Rural India has preserved its epics through *Pandavani* in *Chhattisgarh*, where performers dramati*se the Mahabharata.* Tamil Nadu's *Villu Paatu* combines song and narration using a bow-shaped instrument, while Rajasthan's *Kaavad Katha* and *Pabuji Ki Phad* use painted storytelling devices, making performances both visual and engaging.

Talking of painting devices of storytelling, although the modern comic book form appeared in India only fairly recently, India has had a longstanding tradition of sequential pictorial narratives, dating back thousands of years.

The earliest evidence of such pictorial narratives in India, also known as the 'cave painting', can be traced right back to the Palaeolithic Age. Dated to around the 19th century, the *Chitrakathis*of Paithan were used as aids for oral narratives in Maharashtra. Similarly, the *Kaavad* storytelling tradition of Rajasthan uses paintings on a wooden box that unfolds to reveal more paintings. Mention must be made of *Phad-bachanas* of Rajasthan and *Patachitra* of Bengal, whose unmatched style of scroll painting featured Jagannath and tales from *The Ramayana, The Bhagavad Gita, and the Mahabharata.* One must also not forget that puppet shows have been a staple of many cultures for centuries, like *Putal Nach* in Assam, *Yampuri* in Bihar, *Tholu Bommalata* of Andhra Pradesh and *Kathputlis* of Rajasthan.

The kind of storytelling that has brought the stories of India and its unique way of narration to the global audience is the written one. Written texts, such as novels and short stories, by Indian authors, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie and Sudha Murthy, have made significant contributions to world literature. In the essay we would delve into the details of two of Raja Rao's works to understand the Indian way of storytelling: *India: A Fable* and *Kanthapura.*

Raja Rao's "India: A Fable" is a thought-provoking essay that explores the complexities of Indian identity, culture, and history. Written in 1962, the essay is a reflection of Rao's own experiences as an Indian living in France and his observations on the changing landscape of India during the post-independence era. This essay will speak about the key themes, motifs, and ideas presented in "India: A Fable", examining Rao's unique perspective on India and its place in the world. Rao begins by positing that India is a fable, a narrative that is both real and imagined. He suggests that India's history, culture, and identity are all intertwined, creating a complex tapestry that is difficult to unravel. Rao's use of the term "fable" is deliberate, implying that India's story is both mythical and true, existing in a realm beyond fact and fiction. One of the central themes of "India: A Fable" is the intersection of tradition and modernity. Rao observes that India is a country where ancient traditions and modern ideas coexist, often in tension with each other. He notes that India's attempt to modernise and Westernise has led to a disconnection from its own cultural heritage. Rao argues that India must find a way to balance its traditional values with the demands of modernity. Rao's essay is also a deep personal reflection on the search for Indian identity. As an Indian living in France, Rao grapples with the question of what it means to be Indian. He notes that Indian identity is complex and multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of cultures, languages, and traditions. Rao argues that India's diversity is its strength but also acknowledges the challenges of forging a unified national identity. Rao places great emphasis on the role of mythology and history in shaping Indian identity. He argues that India's myths and legends contain deep truths about the human condition and the nature of reality. Rao also notes that India's history is a rich tapestry of diverse cultures and empires, each leaving its imprint on the country.

In "Kanthapura", Rao attempts to capture the essence of the Indian style of storytelling by using a narrative voice that is reminiscent of oral tradition. The novel is told in a non-linear fashion, with multiple storylines and subplots that are woven together to create a larger narrative. Rao also incorporates mythological and folkloric elements, as well as rhetorical devices such as repetition and rhyme, to create a musical quality. Moorthy's embracement of a Gandhian lifestyle is predicated on a parable-like vision that assumes a revolutionary potency, capable of effecting profound transformation. This narrative strategy underscores the capacity of stories to transcend into mythic realms, thereby providing a robust foundation for revolutionary praxis. The text is replete with a series of such parables and anecdotes, which collectively imbue the narrative with an epic quality, effectively reconfiguring the novelistic genre. "The story in Kanthapura is told with the breathless garrulity of the Puranas where the style rests principally with the spoken word," M. K. Naik remarks, and Raja Rao affirms that this tale could as well be told by a grandmother at dusk to eager children who participate in the process of narration and memorisation. The foreword of "Kanthapura" serves as a crucial piece in understanding the novel's context and its significance. This preface captures the socio-political milieu of India during its turbulent days under British rule. The complexity of "Kanthapura" lies in its attempt to translate Indian ways of thinking and meaning into English, a language considered 'alien' by many. However, English has become an integral part of India's intellectual framework, though not its emotional one. Raja Rao utilises the Puranic art of storytelling.

The narrative structure of the novel eschews traditional notions of formal organisation, instead opting for a fluid, unbroken narrative that unfolds with considerable length and scope. Notably, the text rejects conventional divisions into parts or chapters, instead presenting a continuous, unsegmented narrative. This structural approach bears striking similarities to the Puranas, which are characterised by frequent digressions, episodic interpolations, and passages that often exhibit only a tenuous connection to the primary narrative thread. Furthermore, the novel's portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi as an avatar resonates with the Puranic emphasis on the concept of avatar, underscoring the text's strategic invocation of mythological and cultural tropes.

The inaugural depiction of the village is reminiscent of a sthala-purana, a genre of Sanskrit texts that extol the sacred significance of a particular locale.

The village is consecrated by the presence of the goddess Kenchamma, whose legend parallels the numerous myths of similar provenance that abound in the Puranas. According to the narrative, a demon wreaks havoc on the village, preying on children and abducting women. In response, the sage Tripura undertakes a rigorous pasya, or ascetic discipline, to deliver the village from this terror. Because of his devotion, the goddess Kenchamma descends from the celestial realm and vanquishes the demon. The narrative recounts that Kenchamma "waged such a battle and fought for so many nights that the earth became saturated with the blood of the vanquished, which is why the Kenchamma Hill appears reddened". Thus, the goddess Kenchamma is revered as a protector of the village, safeguarding it from calamity and disaster. The narrator states, "......If not, tell me sister, why should it be red only from the Tippur stream upwards, for a foot down on the other side of the stream you have mud, black and brown, but never red. Tell me, how could this happen, if it were not for Kenchamma and her battle". The story of Goddess Kenchamma is compared by Kaushal Sharma to the coming of the Ganga on this earth from heaven for the purification. He observes that like the Ganga, Kenchamma has come to the rescue of the people of Kanthapura who worship this "great and bounteous" goddess. The narrator of the novel is Achakka, an old woman. She gives us a brilliant portrait of the village. She conveys to us the spirit of the times when the Satyagraha Movement dominated the social climate. She is loquacious. She is a keen observer. She gives us a graphic description of the village. Despite her peripheral presence within the novel, Achakka assumes a pivotal role as a participant in the Satyagraha Movement and as a visionary who possesses a profound understanding of the historical antecedents that have shaped this movement. Her narrative stance is analogous to that of Tiresias in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", serving as a conduit between the cultural context to which she belongs and the literary tradition that she embodies. As a female voice emanating from the margins, Achakka's narrative represents the subaltern history in a dual sense, subverting the dominant discourse and recuperating the repressed experiences of the marginalised. Her story is an exemplar of the residual culture, as conceptualised by Raymond Williams in his seminal essay "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent". The incorporation of this residual narrative is essential for a nuanced understanding of the dominant discourse, as it highlights the lacunae and silences that underpin the dominant cultural narrative. This analysis explores the intersection of myth, history, and language in Raja Rao's novel "Kanthapura." The text's prolific use of myths blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, querying the relationship between past and present. Achakka's narrative, drawn from a collective perception of reality, symbolises the determination of Kanthapura's women, who derive strength from Moorthy and his religious faith. The myth of Kenchamma serves as a solution to their problems, illustrating the simultaneous preservation and subversion of tradition.

Raja Rao's creation of an "Indian" style of English facilitates a faithful representation of India's social milieu. The novel highlights the role of language in conveying narrative meaning and shaping historical discourse. Achakka's use of literal translations and rural idioms underscores her unsophisticated yet authentic narrative voice. The text's ability to convey the story of a specific people and place, while encouraging collective interpretation, contributes to recognition practices and the development of nationalist sentiment. Through *Kanthapura* and his other novels, Raja Rao endeavours to create a distinctive "Indian English" dialect, characteristic of the changing Indian society. The art of storytelling is crucial to this dialect's creation, ensuring the narrative's continuity and engaging newer audiences. Ultimately, the novel's conclusion, where the village is deserted, underscores the enduring power of storytelling, as the brave struggle of *Kanthapura's* people continues to inspire future generations.

Thus, storytelling is not just an art; it is a powerful tool for forming collective memory, shaping cultural identity, preserving history, creating social cohesion, and influencing cultural norms. Through its mechanisms, impact, and significance, storytelling plays a vital role in shaping the shared experiences, values, and traditions that define a community. As a means of intergenerational transmission, community building, cultural preservation, and empowerment, storytelling remains an essential component of human culture and identity. One must not forget that India is not just a geographical entity; it is a metaphysic, a way of being and regarding the self and the world.

And this way of being and regarding starts right from childhood when the imagination is shaped by the stories of grandparents and parents, "Once upon a time…." it usually began and gave rides to wonderland, whose maps the little brains drew, planting the seeds of imagination in them. The land of India does remain a fable, a land of diverse stories, myths, and legends, where the boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred, a metaphysical entity idea inspired by the rich cultural heritage and oral traditions of India, where stories have been passed down through generations, shaping the country's identity and imagination.

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SAREE: STITCHING TOGETHER THE SILKS OF LITERATURE AND FASHION

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Abstract

Fashion can often be timeless, as exemplified by the *saree*, a clothing article that has remained as the six yards of elegance since forever. A clothing article with its own history and revolution but never re-rooted from its origins or identity. This paper aims to delve into the artful connection between the worlds of literature and fashion by following through the evolution and representation of the saree. The subtle yet unique evolution of the saree holds true to *TS Eliot's* theory that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past and that individuality is acquired through the understanding of history. Infused with tradition, history and uniqueness through variety, a saree weaves together Eliot's literary ideals with the threads of *fashion,* proving the idea of *structuralism* that every individual unit connects itself to each other. From ancient sculptures to modern red carpets, the saree held tight to its form while staying open to innovation, thus fulfilling Eliot's requirements for literature. Thus, this research paper strives to analyse how the Indian cultural garment saree stitches together the realms of literature and fashion, thus paying an ode to the ideas of structuralism.

Keywords: Structuralism, T.S Eliot, Tradition, Individuality, Literature, Fashion.

Sari n. (also saree) a length of cotton or silk draped round the body, traditionally worn as a main garment by Indian women. As stated, a saree is a traditional*Indian*garment that is meant to be draped around the wearer. Draping material is usually six yards in length, which is sometimes susceptible to variation; it is often combined with the blouse or *choli*. A saree is often draped over an underskirt; this isn't necessary for many variants of the attire. Though a saree can be worn in multiple ways, the most common way is to wrap the fabric around the waist several times, making pleats in the front, and the rest of the fabric is thrown across the chest and shoulders; the remaining fabric that gracefully dangles across the shoulder is called *pallu* or *pallav*. Etymologically, saree finds its roots in the Sanskrit word *sati* – a strip of cloth which became *sadi* in Prakrit and gradually got anglicised into saree.

While the exact history of origin of the saree is unknown, the common consensus is that the rudimentary version of the saree originated in the Indus Valley civilisation, while there are also assumptions that the Mesopotamian society had a similar style of clothing. This ancestor of the saree was made of cotton and was draped around the waist, often in a trouser-like drape; this drape did not cover the upper body. Sarees further evolved to include three pieces, namely *antariya*, the lower part of the garment; *stanapatta,* presumably the predecessor of *choli;* and *uttariya,* a shawl-like garment that covered the chest and shoulders, which probably influenced the chest pleats and *pallu* of the modern saree, as mentioned in Sanskrit and Pali literature. Thus, the familiar version of the saree can be seen slowly taking its form from as early as the sixth century BCE, but the saree-like drape can only be observed on the lower body during this period. This attire was called the *Sattika*. The classic attire as we know it is believed to have appeared in the post-Mughal period. At this point, the clothing had already absorbed the legacy of the region, for it is an automatic result of the intermingling of techniques and traditions derived from domestic and foreign influence; the latter includes the traders, invaders and conquerors. Sarees underwent further evolution under British Raj. British forces, who were ambassadors of Christian and Victorian morality, found the Indian way of wearing a saree vulgar and obscene, especially since Bengal had a way of draping a saree without a blouse, which led to the introduction of the well-stitched blouse. Despite achieving its evergreen structure, the saree still continues to further evolve in both its presentation and representation, as observed in modern-day cinema and red carpets.

One of the first depictions of saree-like drapes can be found in an *Indus Valleysculptureof a female priest*. The 3rd C BCE sculpture of *Didarganjyakshi* also features a saree-like drape, though the drape only covers the lower body; a *pallav*-like extension can be seen clinging to one hand of the *yakshi. Gandhara sculptures,* which were crafted between the first century BC and seventh century AD, also feature several sculptures depicting saree-like drapes. The Mysore school of painting, which evolved between 1336 and 1565 AD, also features multiple paintings involving varying drapes, including ones similar to the current form of saree. In the early 16th century, a Portuguese traveller described a saree as a very thin, long cloth made of cotton or silk; the cloth is draped along the lower body, and a part of it covers the chest and one shoulder, leaving the other bare. Mughal miniature paintings also feature sarees almost in their contemporary form. The British Raj facilitated the incorporation of the modern blouse as a part of the attire.

Primarily worn by the higher-class women during the British Raj, this version of saree trickled down to other sections of society as well. It is impossible to discuss sarees and their representation without mentioning *Raja Ravi Varma* and his paintings during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

His vibrant artworks depicted the symbol of Indian femininity in manifold ways; he presented the saree in *the nivi*drape, *nauvari* drape, with the *pallu* as a headscarf, etc., thus capturing the ability of the saree to manifest in multiple forms while holding on to its classic structure. The smooth introduction of well-stitched blouses during the British Raj is a testament to the flexible and adaptive yet stable nature of sarees. It was with the advent of visual media entertainment that the saree truly exhibited worldwide its innate ability to shapeshift while staying the same. The garment seamlessly tied together the world of movies and entertainment with the world of deep-rooted tradition.

It is assumed that the saree reached the southern part of India along with *Aryan settlers* as they migrated from North to South India. From there on it evolved separately in each region. Sarees and their representation have often been a reflection of social and cultural trends throughout history; this can easily be observed based on how women belonging to different strata of society chose to adorn their sarees. Royalty and higher-class society used precious gems and metals to embellish their sarees; lower strata of society utilised more affordable options such as wooden beads and pieces of glass. Materials such as silk, brocade and muslin were only available for higher-class women. It wasn't until the twentieth century that lower-caste women of Travancore were freed of the breast tax and were allowed to cover their upper bodies following a series of revolts, such as the *Channar revolt.* It is safe to say that the contemporary saree became a common attire for the majority of women in Kerala well into the twentieth century. Another tale of resistance rests in Goa; after the Portuguese banned weaving, weavers dug out basements for their looms despite the threat of punishment, and this went on until the late twentieth century. Thus, imbuing the saree with the history and struggles of the respective region.

Owing to the classic nature of the saree, it can be draped in manifold ways, each variety rich with collective and individual grace and elegance. The Banarasi saree of Varanasi, or Banaras, in Uttar Pradesh is believed to have originated during the Mughal era, during which silk weaving was introduced in the area. Soaked in the cultural heritage of Varanasi and popularised by Mughal royalty, the Banarasi saree is woven in pure silk combined with precious metallic threads called *zari* made of gold and silver. Also noted for their intricate patterns, these sarees feature motifs inspired by nature, Mughal art and geometric designs. Owing to its rich ancestry, the Banarasi saree is still considered regal. Finding its roots in the rural town of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, the Kanchipuram silksaree is a blend of mulberry silk and *zari,* which are silk threads dipped in liquid gold. Designs in these sarees are believed to be inspired by South Indian temples and nature. Some of the motifs featured in Kanchipuram sarees include *Rudraksham,* inspired by the *Rudraksha bead,* and *Mayilkan,* meaning peacock's eye. The town of Kanchipuram is often mentioned as Silk City, for most of its population depends upon silk weaving. Kanchipuram saree is recognised as the *geographical indication* of the town, thus tying the garment to its region of origin and its heritage. Ideal for the climate of West Bengal, *the Tant* saree is created by loose weaves of cotton. The word *tant* means 'loom' in the Bengali language, and the garment got popular due to the comfort and affordability it offers, making it the common folk's attire. *The Tant* saree is tied to the deep-rooted weaving heritage of Bengal, which dates back to *the* fifteenth century. Before the partition of India, Dhaka was the primary centre for *Tant* weaving, which got shifted into West Bengal following the partition, thus indicating the cultural and historical ties of the garment. Some of the motifs seen in *Tant* sarees are *paisleys,* floral and geometrical patterns. Known for their elaborate *pallu* and vibrant colours, *Paithani saree*s reflect the culture of Maharashtra. This variety of saree originated in Paithan town of Aurangabad, and the attire is mentioned in history predating the Satavahana period. Created using the unique technique called *Kadiyal*, the border and body are woven separately and seamlessly stitched together. The Paithani saree features pure silk thread combined with *zari* with intricate motifs such as flowers or peacocks on the pallu. The body of the saree features delicate motifs inspired by nature and geometric designs.

The three-piece drape of the saree still survives in many forms, one of which is the *setmundu*or*mundum neriyathum* from Kerala. This drape comprises a blouse, a bottom part which is draped around the waist, and a shawl-like piece which is draped and pleated to cover the chest and one shoulder with the *pallu* flowing down this shoulder. Strikingly similar to the seamless version of the saree, the *setmundu* has retained the three-piece ancestry of the traditional attire. The clothing is considered auspicious, and borders are often dyed with turmeric or saffron; metallic yarn made of gold or silver is also used along the border. The costume of *Mohiniyattam,* a classical dance in Kerala, features a dramatic drape of saree with a fishtail-like drape in the front. Rajasthani traditional attires such as *ghagra* and *lehenga* are all reminiscent of the three-piece ancestry of sarees. As mentioned earlier, the oldest form of saree features a trouser-like drape which can still be seen in the traditional Maharashtrian drape called *the nauvari drape*; a similar yet different drape called *the madisar drape* can be seen among Iyer and Iyyengar Brahmin communities of Tamil Nadu.

The Gujarati style of draping a saree is strikingly different from all the mentioned methods, for it is draped in a way that the *pallu* region comes in the front and covers the chest. These varying ways of draping a saree and its ability to simultaneously exist in varying yet similar forms are an ode to the versatile nature of the garment.

Sarees hold religious significance as well; goddesses of the Hindu religion are often depicted wearing a saree, and sarees are given as sacred offerings as well owing to them being the symbol of grace, femininity and tradition. Silk sarees are often worn by Hindu women during auspicious occasions such as religious festivals or temple visits and during their wedding ceremony. Goddesses are often draped in red sarees, as red symbolises power and passion, while yellow sarees are considered auspicious. In Indian culture, a woman's body is draped in a white saree during her death rites to symbolise the sacred journey of the soul into the afterlife. On the contrary, a Christian bride wears a white saree owing to the purity associated with the colour; it is also a testament to how the land, culture and tradition influenced sarees and how sarees have held on to their classic nature. While red sarees empowered Hindu women and white sarees accentuated the purity of the Christian bride, plain white sarees consciously or unconsciously oppressed the Hindu widow, who was and is often expected to exclusively wear white as a symbol of giving up the joys and colours of life, thus revealing the multifaceted symbolisms associated with sarees, which further ties them down to the traditions and customs of the land. *Pallu* is also used as a headscarf by women of various religious communities. Saree did not shy away from adapting to the various religious and customary needs across varying communities.

Once purely associated with tradition, the advent of cinema in India resulted in the saree being viewed as a symbol of fashion and self-expression. The first Indian feature film, *Raja Harishchandra,* undoubtedly featured women wearing sarees, thus proving that there is no portrayal of Indian tradition without mentioning sarees, a fact which holds true even today. The popularity of cinema also popularised varying portrayals of sarees. The 1933 movie, *Karma,* presented actress Devika Rani in *Indo-Western sarees,* proclaiming early on the adaptive capability of the attire. Many older Indian movies across various industries featured celestial beings such as *apsaras* in a *nauvari*-like drape on the lower body combined with a fishtail drape, giving them both sensual and mesmerising appeal. The saree was draped in an unorthodox yet charming way by Mumtaz in the 1968 movie, *Brahmachari,* revealing that the world is yet to unlock a plethora of ways of draping the seamless attire. With the bold blouse choice paired with a Gujarati-style saree drape in the 1994 movie *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* the saree and its representation were no longer tied to modesty. And it was certainly not the first successful attempt to give sarees a bolder edge. This sensuousness reached new heights with Priyanka Chopra pairing a bikini top with a sequined saree in the 2008 movie *Dostana,* further establishing the flexible nature of the saree and how it refuses to stay back and watch the world move on. This is further concreted by observing the red-carpet appearances of sarees, especially the recent ones. Many Indian and even foreign celebrities have chosen to wear sarees on international red carpets. Indian actresses such as Aishwarya Rai, Priyanka Chopra and Deepika Padukone have embraced the saree on multiple platforms in manifold ways, owing to its versatile nature. Natasha Poonawala wore a tulle saree paired with a dramatic corset on the 2022 MET Gala red carpet, once again proving the pliant yet remarkable nature of the garment. The iconic garment did not fail to influence international fashion as well; Zendaya and Gigi Hadid chose to wear sarees for NMAC 2023, both drapes unique, innovative and enchanting in their own ways. Naomi Campbell wore a saree-inspired gown from the 2010 spring collection of Chanel to the 2023 MET Gala. Chinese singer-songwriter Curley Gao wore a saree-inspired gown set by Rahul Mishra to the Weibo Music Awards, 2023, and the list goes on. The plethora of ways of draping a saree does not end here; techniques evolve while the soul remains the same. Never straying away from its roots, saree found ways to evolve while inspiring fashion across the globe.

Saree has had its fair share of changes with the passage of time. Though handlooms for weaving sarees still exist, they are mostly replaced by powerlooms. Natural dyes have almost completely been replaced by synthetic ones. Embellishments and motifs mostly saw addition rather than displacement; floral patterns, block printing, *zari*, *paisley*, geometrical designs and much more have survived, with additions such as *polka* dots, abstract patterns, etc., finding their place among traditional motifs; in the case of embellishments such as gems, they are available in varying qualities, from expensive original ones to cheaper artificial ones or even sequins; the same is the case with *zari,* which is now available as original precious metal yarns or their cheaper alternatives, creating a polarity of authenticity and affordability which allows sarees to circulate among every strata of society. Along with traditional choices of fabric such as cotton, pure silk, brocade, muslin, etc., modern-day sarees are also crafted in chiffon, net, satin, georgette, linen and much more; today sarees are also made by intermingling more than one kind of fabric.

Thus, a saree is evidently an artful amalgamation of tradition and modernity, commingling past and present like a poem written through the weaves of history and tradition with the ever-fluid yarn of time; embracing its past and tradition within its present and its past, ready to incorporate changes of the present, making the garment a result of the concrete legacy of the past and the innovation of the present.

This idea of intermingling of past and present can be seen in T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". First published in *The Egoist* magazine in 1919 and then incorporated into *The Sacred Woods* in 1920, the essay states his ideals on what imbues individuality into a work of literature.

Eliot in *The Egoist* "Past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." He primarily focuses on the influence of literary tradition, legacy and history in the present works of literature and how *present* literature provides *past* literature with new insights and perspectives. He theorised that *individuality* is acquired through the understanding of *history,* accentuating the fact that a literary work does not gain individuality unless it evidently showcases *historical awareness* and respect for tradition while also finding scope for innovation, inevitably tying together the legacy of the past with the innovation of the present. Eliot's theory on tradition and individual talent has contributed significantly to laying the foundation of *structuralism.* Structuralism denies the existence of independent units and analyses the connection between basic structures of human culture by unearthing the connection between smaller units within these structures. Structuralism validates the idea that every field in human life interacts or connects with each other in one way or the other. It is structuralism that allows the application of literary theories in the realm of fashion, both of which seem to be two different structures associated with human culture. Eliot's theory on tradition and individuality is a part of a greater structure called literature, which can be applied to sarees, which are a part of a greater structure called fashion.

According to Eliot's theory, an ideal literary text should have an awareness of the past and respect for tradition while still maintaining the capacity for innovation. On analysing the saree as a text, it is possible to observe all these qualities in the garment qualifying it for applying Eliot's literary theory. From finding its roots in Indus Valley civilisation to staying relevant in the twenty-first century, the saree has absorbed the tradition and legacy of the land as its own. The saree has always been an ever-evolving symbol that seldom changed its form. Through various epochs, the saree has maintained its status as a symbol of Indian femininity, tradition and culture. While maintaining this status, it has also been the symbol of revolution and evolution. From being a means of covering nudity, the garment evolved along with its people. Though the saree looks different from when it was initially created, its culmination into its latest form is a journey fuelled by traditions and legacies of the past. Thus, making it aware of its *pastness*, stability, and steadiness, the evolution of the saree is symbolic of its individuality acquired through this awareness. The transformation of the garment, from being two separate pieces of cloth to one seamless piece of fabric, in itself is imbued with historical awareness. Though the form of the garment hasn't undergone much change since then, the fabric used, methods of draping, embellishments, etc., have always been changing, adding to the fact that the state of being classic is to maintain the legacy of the past while being open to innovation. The saree has been a symbol of resistance in Goa, while for women of Kerala it became accessible due to a revolution. Thus, imbuing this cloth with a history of resistance and revolution. In the towns of Kanchipuram and Banaras, sarees shape their culture and tradition. The age-old tradition of making the saree from silk and cotton is still very much popular, while a plethora of other fabrics, such as linen and georgette, has entered the field, proving how the past and present co-exist simultaneously within the garment. While the older ways of adorning the garment are still extant, various new additions are included each day. Embellishments used in sarees have always been representative of the socio-economic and geographical identity of a community. Regional varieties of saree, such as *nauvari* and *madisar* drape, remain symbolic of the perennial nature of culture and traditions of the past. A similar case is with the *set-mundu* of Kerala and *ghagra* of Rajasthan, both of which have retained the tradition of saree during its developmental stage. Though artificial dyes are almost always preferred over natural ones today, saree remains as colourful as ever. The red silk saree is still representative of divinity and power, while the yellow saree remains auspicious as ever, and the white saree still symbolises purity. The widow wearing a white saree is reminiscent of the patriarchal side of Indian traditions. Simultaneous existence of innovative drapes and representations of sarees on various new-age platforms and red carpets proves how the garment is ready to evolve while holding onto its historical sense and pastness. Thus, saree has neither failed to hold on to the values of tradition or lessons from history, nor has it failed to accept the innovation of the present times. The clothing has never refused to fall back into the abyss of forgetfulness or to leave behind its identity as the representative of Indian femininity and tradition.

This fluid yet rigid identity of saree is the perfect testament to Eliot's idea that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past and that individuality is acquired through the understanding of the history.

Thus, the characteristics of the garment saree provide a perfect substrate for the application of Eliot's theory, which in turn proves that it is possible to apply theories of literature in the realm of fashion, which inevitably validates the ideas of structuralism.

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FILMS AND TELEVISION: A MIRROR OF CULTURAL PARADIGM SHIFT AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS

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Abstract

Films and television since their emergence have occupied an important seat in reflecting and shaping cultural ideals/shifts and ideological construction, serving both as mirrors and moulders of society. The paper analyses the concept through the book *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*, David Croteau and William Hoynes. Media is not just a passive reflection of society but rather an active force in shaping identity, ideologies and cultural norms. Through storytelling, visual representation and production practices, films and television negotiate power dynamics, challenge or reinforce hegemonic narratives, and contribute to the ideological construction of society. By applying Croteau's media framework in the film *The White Tiger* (2021), it examines how entertainment media engage with evolving social issues such as family, gender, class, politics, globalisation and urbanisation, analysing the ways in which they either uphold dominant discourses or provide platforms for resistance and change. A cultural shift and ideology are introduced in society through the use of 'repetition' and 'normalisation'. Cultural shift in Indian marriages is quite normalised through films and daily soap operas, where a big fat Indian wedding is the new normal. Infusing new ideologies is more resistive than cultural shift, as conventional norms and mainstream values are generally reaffirmed by news, popular films, and network television, but there's always resistance which provides perspective different from the dominant media. Recognising the role of films and television as cultural and ideological forces is essential in understanding their impact on society.

Keywords: Media, culture, ideology, normalization, repetition

Introduction

Media is the fourth pillar of a democratic nation. It plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting social values, beliefs, cultural paradigms, and ideological construction. Cultural paradigm reflects the dominant beliefs, values, practices and norms of a group of people. It serves as an overarching framework through which a society establishes and interprets their social realities, cultural values, influencing their perception of realities, identity, moral and social order. Cultural paradigm shift refers to a fundamental change in the dominant beliefs, values, and social norms within a society. Media plays a crucial role in both reflection and reinforcement of cultural paradigm and also as an engine of cultural shift and ideological constructs. Such shifts occur due to factors like technological advancement, economic transformation, political movements, and ideological changes. David Croteau and William Hoynes in *Media and Society* describe ideology; "Ideology is not only about the beliefs held by the world but also to the basic ways in which the world is defined". Croteau and Haynes in *Media and Society* argues that media does not passively depict reality rather actively constructs it; how media reflects and drives cultural and ideological shifts by challenging existing norms or adapting to new societal expectations. Films and television serve as both cultural backgrounds where traditional values collide with emerging ideologies, ultimately shaping public consciousness.

Ramin Bahrani's 2021 film *The White Tiger* acts as a mirror to cultural paradigm shifts and ideological constructs in Indian society, regarding class, caste, fashion, marriage, gender and politics. The film exposes the deeply rooted exploitative nature and the practiced hierarchy at the same time challenges the dominant narratives, offering a critical examination of power dynamics and shifting cultural practices and ideologies.

Cast: A Silent Representative

"Representation implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor of making things mean." Caste in Indian films and television has been overtly discussed. It has either been ignored or romanticised, as films and television are mostly for entertainment and the profit-making business. In most of the Indian films and television, the names of lead casting characters are of high caste, like Singhania, Chaudhary, Sinha, Singh, Pandey, Pratap, Reddy, Chauhan and many others.

The symbolic significance of the name suggests the dynamics of power structure and how "some ideas will have an advantage—because they are perceived as popular or build on familiar media images". *The White Tiger* portrays caste as an invisible yet omnipresent force; the protagonist, Balram Halwai, belongs to a lower caste, and the name itself suggests the group it belongs to.

The film portrays how marginalised groups have no ideological access to hygiene and self-care. Balram feels personal loathing for himself when he realises how unhygienic he is and says, 'Why didn't my father teach me not to scratch my groin and brush my teeth?'. Usually in films and television, marginalised communities are shown to be unhygienic and have no sense of self-care. Films and television most of the time show lower-caste people in extreme poverty, unemployment and in the role of servant, reinforcing the ideology of poverty with marginalisation. If the film shows a different narrative, maybe such marginalised people will see themselves differently, as films hold a lot of power in changing ideology and cultural shifts in society. Unlike earlier Bollywood films that romanticised lower-caste struggles (*Sujata, Lagaan*), *The White Tiger* exposes the violence and servitude inherent in caste hierarchies. The film shows a cultural shift through the embrace of a ruthless, survivalist ethos that reflects modern neoliberal India. Drawing from Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the film underscores how the ruling elite perpetuate dominance through cultural and ideological means, maintaining a cycle of oppression where the lower classes remain subjugated. Balram's rise from a 'half-baked' villager to a self-made businessman challenges the traditional caste-based occupational rigidity. His assertion of agency disrupts the feudal master-servant dynamic, reflecting the shifting paradigms where subaltern voices demand recognition. However, his success is tainted by moral dilemmas, suggesting that breaking free from oppression often necessitates navigating through ethical compromises.

Class: The Immutable Divides

Class mobility is the most prominent theme in Indian films and television. Croteau and Haynes underline how constant repetition of a certain ideology makes it normal and natural; if the social structures and social relationships are defined as natural, they take on a kind of permanency and legitimacy that elevates them to the realm of the uncontested. Balram in *The White Tiger* uses a metaphor of "rooster coop" for the self-perpetuating nature of class oppression. He feels being a servant is ingrained in his brain since his birth, and as the rooster knows the killing and oppression, it still never tries to escape. Balram explains how India now has only two types of class, one with a big belly and another with a flat belly, making class-based exploitation a modern problem in India. Media has always defined success with class mobility. The capitalist ideology of success is the only definition in the present time, which results in overconsumption and materialistic culture. Thus, in every Indian film and soap opera, the story revolves around the elite class and has hardly any representation of various classes and their lives. *The White Tiger* shows how the elite class, represented by Ashok and his family, exhibits a bubble of wealth and privilege, unaware of the struggles of the working class.

The film portrays India's economic disparity through visual contrast – opulent high rises of Delhi versus cramped, dark quarters of Balram's village and later his servant quarter. The film shows emerging new privileges in urban India: the luxury of having windows and seeing stars. While Ashok moves to an apartment with a balcony and clear sky view, Balram moves into a dingy room with no window and very dim light, which reflects a depressing atmosphere. The cultural shift takes place when Balram defies the established ideology of master and servant and resorts to violence and deception. He questioned the ethical dilemma of crime between the elite and poor classes. Elite people are extraordinary men who can kill and move on, but a poor person gets a mental breakdown and takes time to resort to normalcy. The film raises an ethical question: is violence and malpractice the only means for the poor to rise in a deeply unequal system?

Fashion: Symbolism of Power and Resistance

Films and television are the biggest trendsetters of fashion in India. Cultural shift is most visible in the clothing patterns of people. In *The White Tiger*, fashion serves as a visual indicator of power, identity, and class aspiration. Balram's initial attire – worn-out clothes and a driver's uniform – symbolises his subjugation and servitude, while Ashok's western suit reflects his elite, globalised status. After killing Ashok, he adopts a polished, corporate look, signifying his entry into the ruling class. Balram's shift in appearance reflects how class mobility in neoliberal India is not just economic but also aesthetic and performative. Fashion in the film also underscores the aspirational yet deceptive nature of social mobility. While Balram's new appearance grants him a superficial sense of empowerment, it does not absolve him of his past oppression. The film suggests that true liberation extends beyond material transformation, requiring structural changes in power relations.

It is the media which determines a society's acceptable clothing. Films and television set the rules for which cloth is appropriate for which occasion and festival. Traditional clothes are worn in festivals, while in everyday Western clothes.

It is good in some ways, but the problem arises when someone doesn't follow the rules laid by the media or when someone doesn't fit in that clothing measurement; then that person is labelled as an outcast or bullied, and that creates an identity crisis. With the increasing globalisation and urbanisation in India, 'culture has become increasingly global". The clothing has become almost the same in every part of the world, and this happened because of Western influence in films and television.

Croteau points out, "The international advertising, television, and music scenes have helped generate an emerging cross-national, global youth culture in which teens in different countries adopt similar styles in clothes and appearance; consume the same soda, cigarettes, and fast food; and listen to and play the same kind of music." The cultural shift in fashion ideology is rampant in India, and it has taken a fully-fledged new form. The cultural shift in clothing is seen in *The White Tiger* when Balram sees girls in Western dresses in front of the mall and how clothing defines a demarcation between who enters the mall and who doesn't. Men in suits and ties are the eligible ones, while Balram in driver's clothing is not eligible. The ideological construct in clothing is that what is Western is good, while traditional is a marker of backwardness and poverty.

Marriage: A Site of Power and Subjugation

Films and television have acquired an undisputed charm in changing the marriage landscape in India. Traditionally marriage was a cultural affair where it was more about rituals and customs. With the rise of urbanisation and capitalism, it has become a matter of business and profit. Marriages in films and soap operas show a big fat wedding with lavish decoration, settings, and fashion that gets acquired by common masses, as in films like *Veere Ki Wedding*. Marriage in India has shifted from a cultural to a class symbol. Every person wants to associate themselves with the urban elite class, and so the rise of lavish weddings. Films not only construct the ideology but also shift the culture. The choice and colour of clothing in weddings has undergone a significant shift. The red saree is replaced by a pastel lehenga and cooler undertone colours. Adding a veil on top of the saree or lehenga is another cultural shift.

The White Tiger portrays another ideological shift in marriage; the film contrasts the arranged marriages (Balram's family) with the love marriages (Ashok and Pinky). Media has played an important role in shifting society's ideology from arranged to love marriage in India. Although this cultural shift happened for a good cause, with increasing urbanisation and capitalism, it has taken another shift to love-cum-arranged marriage, where people are only seeing the economic benefit. Social mobility is the only factor which people seek in marriage in urban cities. The film also highlights an alternate ideology of marriage. Marriage as a hegemonic ideology of control, as marriage in Balram's lower-caste family is strictly controlled to maintain caste purity and economic stability. Balram sees marriage as a hindrance to his ambition, and despite societal pressure, he rejects marriage entirely, signalling a break from traditional family structures in favour of individual ambition.

Marriage is portrayed in *The White Tiger* as both a tool of social mobility and an institution reinforcing patriarchal and casteist norms. Ashok and Pinky's intercultural marriage represents the influence of Western modernity, contrasting sharply with Balram's constrained existence. While their relationship appears progressive, it ultimately collapses under societal pressures, illustrating the resilience of traditional structures. Conversely, Balram's lack of a romantic or marital subplot underscores the deprivation of personal choice for the subaltern. His existence revolves around servitude, stripping him of intimate human connections. This absence highlights how marriage, a fundamental societal institution, remains inaccessible to those at the lowest rungs, reinforcing their perpetual subjugation.

Gender: Resistance and Empowerment

Indian films and television have historically reinforced traditional family structures and gender roles. It has long reinforced patriarchal values, portraying women as dependent on men. The dominant ideology of what an ideal woman is is the one who is *sanskari* and a self-sacrificing figure. With times as women became more independent economically and socially, the ideological construct of gender also changed in films but very minutely in television. While films do promote traditional gender roles, many movies are made where women are shown in human lights. Women are not only carers and God-like figures but also chaos makers, making mistakes, and bad lovers. In recent films women are shown in a negative light just like men, who have all the faults of a normal human, unlike the earlier ideology of women making no mistakes. While television still portrays women in the same traditional narrative of holding up marriage values, being carers for the whole family, giving moral support, and putting everyone's needs over theirs. In recent times a new ideology has emerged in gender, that women are acing in handling both professional and family life, which puts undue pressure on women because that's the ideology being propagated. In gender representation, Indian films and television are divided.

The cultural shift in gender is seen in *The White Tiger,* where Pinky, an Indian-American, challenges Indian norms around women's agency. She is shown as a woman who makes mistakes, even commits a crime, when she kills a child in her drunken state. She also speaks her voice in the patriarchal house.

Even in Balram village, it's his grandmother who controls the money and family affairs, where she is shown controlling the people around and also as a power-hungry woman. *The White Tiger* presents a counter-narrative in gender representation, unlike soap operas and earlier movies. Simultaneously, it presents the persistent ideological norms as gender dynamics in *The White Tiger* exposes the intersectionality of oppression. Pinky, despite her Western upbringing, experiences gendered marginalisation within Ashok's family, reinforcing the persistence of patriarchal control even within the elite.

Her perpetual departure reflects the limited agency available to women, even those seemingly privileged. For lower-class women, agency is almost non-existent. Balram's grandmother represents the authoritarian matriarch, yet her power is limited within patriarchal confines. The absence of female servants in the film starkly contrasts the prevalent reality of domestic labourers in India, subtly erasing women from the narrative of resistance and struggle.

Politics: The Illusion of Democracy

The White Tiger is a film criticising corruption, democracy and power. The film starts with a satirical tone on democracy, setting the tone for the film. Balram criticises the pride for democracy in India by juxtaposing India with China. He says if he becomes the prime minister of India, he would first build sewage pipes and then democracy. In India democracy works for the urban elite and not for the poor and middle class. The political landscape in the film is depicted as a corrupt and manipulative system that perpetuates inequality. The film critiques the symbiotic relationship between politicians and the elite, where democracy functions as an illusion rather than an egalitarian mechanism. The film exposes India's political corruption, where elections are manipulated by the elite to maintain power. Politicians are portrayed as corporate puppets, reinforcing Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony. Politics and politicians both use democracy for igniting nationalism fervour in the working class while serving the real use of democracy to urban elites. Earlier films like Mother India upheld socialist nationalism, portraying leaders as benevolent.

The White Tiger exposes the neoliberal reality – where power is concentrated among the wealthy, and politics serves the capital rather than the people. The "rooster coop" metaphor used in the film not only depicts the state of the working class but also of the people of India. Even though Indian citizens know the blatant corruption and moral degeneration of politicians, they still vote for such politicians just for communal leaning. Indian daily soap operas hardly deal with political issues. They are more focused on the portrayal of daily life with illogical story plots. While the media shows a leaning towards the ruling party. Balram's narrative exposes how systematic corruption infiltrates every aspect of governance. His ultimate rebellion–killing Ashok and assuming a new identity–reflects a radical rejection of this system. However, the film problematises this rebellion, questioning whether individual acts of defiance can dismantle entrenched strictures or merely recreate new hierarchies.

Conclusion

Croteau and Haynes in Media and Ideology outline that media is not just a reflection of reality but an active site of ideological struggle, where narratives of oppression, rebellion, and transformation are constantly negotiated. *The White Tiger* exemplifies how films can both reinforce and challenge dominant ideologies and be an engine for cultural shift. By exposing caste oppression, class mobility myths, aesthetic hierarchies, shifting marriage norms, gender, and political corruption, the film reflects the cultural paradigm shifts and ideological constructs of contemporary India. Ultimately, the film invites viewers to question whether true liberation is attainable within the existing ideological framework or if a more radical transformation is necessary.

Films and television are an ever-evolving medium for cultural shifts and ideological constructs. They shape a society's thinking, manners, norms, and culture, showing their loyalty to the urban elite ideology and culture. Films and television shows, whether consciously or subconsciously, reproduce dominant ideologies or offer subversive counter-narratives. As digital platforms expand, the Indian media ideological landscape will continue to evolve, offering new opportunities for resistance, redefining cultural identities, and making a crucial space for negotiating new cultural paradigms.

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* IN SHAKESPEARE AND NEIL GAIMAN

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to make a comparative study between William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Neil Gaiman's reinterpretation of the same in his graphic novel *The Sandman: A Midsummer Night's Dream.* The Shakespearean comedy which was written in the late 16th century represents an exploration of love, illusion, and the interplay between the natural and supernatural realms, using theatricality as both subject and structure. In contrast, Gaiman's modern reinterpretation reimagines Shakespeare's play as a metafictional performance commissioned by Morpheus (Dream) or an audience of real fairies, interweaving historical and mythical elements.

In order to critically examine Shakespeare's themes in the graphic novel, Gaiman is exploring the transformative power of art, the nature of creativity, and the sacrifices required for artistic immortality. The incorporation of Christopher Marlowe, a rival and contemporary of Shakespeare, enriches the interplay of art, competition, and sacrifices demanded by genius. By juxtaposing the classical text with its modern retelling, this study examines how Shakespeare's themes are expanded upon in Gaiman's narrative to reflect the evolving nature of art and its resonance across time. It also considers the transformation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from a theatrical production to a graphic novel as a commentary on the enduring adaptability of classical works.

Through a comparative lens, the research analyses the thematic interplay between reality and illusion, the portrayal of the supernatural, and the role of storytelling in defining human experience between the two texts. While Shakespeare's work reflects the socio-cultural norms of the Elizabethan era, Gaiman recontextualises the narrative to interrogate the burdens and legacies of artistic genius. This study demonstrates how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been transformed across time and mediums, serving as a dialogue between the past and present, and underscores the enduring relevance of the Shakespearean work in the discourse of graphic narrative.

Along with close textual reading of both the works, the paper will try to address the comparison/gap between the texts through the lens of critical adaptation studies. This paper tries to look from the textual to the graphic/visual and deconstruct the notion of the canonical play.

Keywords: supernatural, graphic novel, adaptation, reality and illusion, artistic transformation.

Introduction

Neil Gaiman's graphic novel as a modern myth explores themes of love, desire, and sacrifice in a contemporary context. By integrating Shakespeare into comic books, Gaiman challenges the notion that only the written word can convey ideals of humanity through art; at the same time, it makes Shakespeare's complex themes and language more accessible to a modern audience. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was integrated into American popular culture, enjoyed by diverse audiences in various settings. The period saw a significant resurgence in the relevance of Shakespeare in modern media, largely through various film adaptations and reinterpretations that made his works more accessible to contemporary audiences. Some notable films which were adapted at the time are Kenneth Branagh's adaptations of *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*. These adaptations allowed modern interpreters to explore and analyse Shakespeare's themes through contemporary lenses, making his insights into love, power, and human behaviour more relevant to today's societal issues. The success of films like *Shakespeare in Love*, which won an Academy Award for Best Picture in 1999.

However, this brought a "highbrow" sensibility to mainstream audiences due to Shakespeare's use of language, characterisation, and the dramatic structure. This blending of literary prestige and popular entertainment demonstrated that Shakespeare could captivate both elite critics and the general public, rekindling interest in his works.

By presenting Shakespeare's works in visually dynamic formats, these adaptations helped to demystify his language and themes, making them more relatable and engaging for students and general viewers. This shift has encouraged educational institutions to integrate film and performance as part of Shakespeare studies. On the other hand, the films were marketed alongside popular actors and modern cinematic techniques, facilitating a fusion of Shakespeare with mainstream media.

Gaiman intertwines his own creations with those of Shakespeare, thus infusing the narrative with a layered complexity that invites readers to reflect on larger existential themes, similar to those presented in the original play.

The graphic novel also serves as a vehicle to explore how dreams and reality interact, echoing the original play's exploration of the thin line between fantasy and reality. The choice to adapt *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a graphic novel allows for innovative storytelling techniques that combine text and imagery. This showcases how Shakespeare's works can endure and thrive in contemporary cultural contexts, bridging the gap between "high art" and popular culture.

Sandman as a Mode of Literary Adaptation

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* can be understood as a mode of literary adaptation that intricately weaves together various elements from classical literature, mythology, and folklore, resulting in a unique reinterpretation of these texts. His work is rich in references to a wide range of literary sources, including Shakespeare, Greek mythology, and the *Bible*. By drawing upon these texts, Gaiman creates a tapestry that invites readers to engage with the original works while experiencing them in a new context. For instance, his adaptation of Shakespeare in A *Midsummer Night's Dream* explores themes of creativity and the responsibilities of the artist. *The Sandman* series delves into themes such as dreams, identity, and the nature of storytelling, which are prevalent in the source material but are contemporarily re-examined through Gaiman's lens. Through the series, he questioned the boundaries between reality and fiction, reflecting on the metaphysical nature of dreams and existence. Through adaptations of other literary works, he ponders the role of the artist and the transformative power of stories, suggesting that art can mirror, distort, and evoke deeper truths about life.

There's a blend of genres, as by incorporating elements of graphic storytelling, horror, fantasy, and mythology, Gaiman transforms literary adaptations into a multi-genre experience. This hybrid form allows him to reach and resonate with a broader audience, making classic themes accessible and relevant to contemporary readers. Gaiman's version does more than just honour the original; it significantly changes and enhances the play by incorporating Shakespeare into the story, adding intellectual significance and depth (Horne 81).

Gaiman's retelling of Shakespeare's work, while paying homage to the playwright's genius, can also be seen as commodifying Shakespeare, presenting him as an icon to be manipulated for contemporary narratives. Also, the way Gaiman weaves in the fantastical elements of his own universe, he presents Shakespeare as a character whose historical significance is reframed through modern storytelling techniques. This transition can be perceived as a form of exploitation, where Shakespeare's identity and artistry are reshaped to serve Gaiman's narrative purposes rather than simply celebrating his original work. Somehow, by embedding Shakespeare within a narrative that features fantastical elements, Gaiman invites readers to draw connections between the historical struggles faced by Shakespeare — such as competition, censorship, and the quest for patronage — and the broader themes of survival and creativity reflected in his text.

Scholars such as Anne Barton and Stephen Orgel have explored the themes of love and transformation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Barton emphasises the play's exploration of the fluidity of identity and relationships, arguing that the magical elements serve to highlight the irrational aspects of love. Critics have analysed how the play reflects contemporary anxieties about race and cultural identity during Shakespeare's time, establishing a critical framework to reassess the implications of these representations in modern adaptations like Gaiman's.

The work of scholars such as Peter Holland and Michael Bristol addresses how adaptations of Shakespeare, like Gaiman's, enable a reinterpretation of classic texts through a postmodern lens. They argue that contemporary adaptations often critique or complicate notions of authorship and interpretation, thereby reflecting modern sensibilities and cultural tensions. Gaiman's adaptation challenges readers' expectations about character consistency, narrative closure, and the nature of authorship itself.

Adaptation of Characters

The adaptation of characters from various literary, mythological, and historical sources is a fundamental aspect that enhances the narrative complexity and thematic depth of the series. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare serves as a double for Gaiman, reflecting on the responsibilities of being a creator. This adaptation allows Gaiman to explore the nuances of artistic inspiration, particularly through the lens of Shakespeare's identity and legacy.

Morpheus, the protagonist of the graphic novel shown as the Dream Lord, is an original character that embodies the essence of dreams and storytelling. Gaiman draws on various mythological figures associated with dreams, such as Morpheus from Greek mythology, but reinterprets him as a complex, flawed character with deep emotional struggles. This adaptation highlight's themes of responsibility, loss, and the nature of dreams. By incorporating Shakespeare into the narrative as a character who interacts with the fantastical elements of the Sandman universe, Gaiman effectively transforms Shakespeare from a historical dramatist into a living figure who grapples with both the weight of his artistic legacy and the transient nature of fame and recognition. Unlike a traditional theatre patron, Morpheus is not merely entertained; rather, he acts as a deity-like figure overseeing the execution of a grand design. "I do not know where the words come from. They simply arrive. And they arrange themselves as if I had no part in it..." The stated remark strengthens the notion that Shakespeare is not fully in control of his own talent. Instead, Morpheus, the deity of dreams and stories, has impacted his mind, transforming Shakespeare into a conduit for something bigger. This reflects how, later in the story, Puck takes over the actor's role, stressing that stories have their own lives. Hence, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is transformed into a commentary on the price of brilliance by Gaiman, who frames Shakespeare's inventiveness as something outside and supernatural, implying that brilliant artists might be instruments of forces they cannot comprehend.

In the graphic novel, the depiction of Shakespeare as a struggling dramatist with a yearning for his work to resonate reflects Gaiman's exploration of the theme of artistic legacy: how creators grapple with their influence and the potential for their works to outlive them. From the outlook of Gaiman, aligns with the idea that the character Shakespeare's gift is not entirely his own but granted to him by Morpheus. "I do not know where the words come from. They simply arrive. And they arrange themselves as if I had no part in it...". *The Sandman* version removes the typical view of Shakespeare as a self-made genius. Rather, it implies that his talent comes from outside himself, almost as if it is magical—a direct effect of his deal with Dream. In Shakespeare's original work, characters such as Puck control events quietly; in this story, Morpheus takes on that part, shaping reality itself. Gaiman changes the emphasis from what Shakespeare produced to the reasons and methods behind his creativity. This tension serves to highlight Shakespeare's status as an icon, but it also reveals the vulnerabilities that might lie beneath that iconography. Gaiman also complicates the way readers understand writers as cultural figures. He critiques the phenomenon where cultural icons are often idealised, leading to a disconnect between their real experiences and the public persona constructed around them.

According to Linda Hutcheon, characters engage audiences through recognition, alignment, and allegiance, and adaptations reshape their psychological depth to fit new rhetorical and aesthetic goals. In order to illustrate the character of Shakespeare with Gaiman's text, transporting Shakespeare from history into a fictionalised, supernatural narrative, altering how readers recognise him. Gaiman deepens Shakespeare's characterisation by aligning readers with his internal struggles with a more human character as both an artist and a father.

Elements of Popular Culture in Gaiman's Graphic Novel

The integration of fantastical elements with the historical figure of Shakespeare serves to blur the lines between reality and imagination, emphasising that the act of storytelling itself is a form of magic. Gaiman uses this interplay to suggest that the mythical qualities of Shakespeare's works, such as the presence of fairies, magic, and dream logic, both represent and transcend the era in which he wrote. This layering invites readers to reflect on how art can transform mundane realities into profound experiences, allowing Gaiman to critique how certain narratives are elevated while others are marginalised.

Gaiman's work effectively utilises visual aesthetics to enhance narratives, evoking emotional responses similar to theatre. The way characters are visually represented in the graphic novel can influence audience interpretation and meaning, akin to actors' portrayals in theatre. The Sandman series contains numerous nods to popular culture, including music, films, and other comics, creating a nuanced tapestry that resonates with the experiences of the reader. This blend enriches the storyline and connects it to a wider cultural context. The incorporation of fantastical elements, such as the Dream Lord (Morpheus) and actual fairy characters from Shakespeare's play, connects classical literature with fantastical storytelling common in popular culture. Gaiman's use of visuals in conjunction with the dialogue adds a layer of meaning and nuance that can differ significantly from Shakespeare's text. The art draws readers into the emotional and thematic fabric of the adaptation, enhancing the impact of the narrative.

These elements of popular culture not only enhance Gaiman's narrative but also position *The Sandman* as a significant work within both the graphic novel genre and the broader landscape of contemporary storytelling.

Shakespeare as a Popular Dramatist and His Representation in Gaiman's Text

The popularity of Shakespeare in the early modern context was a different sort of popularity that challenged highbrow and lowbrow creative and cultural practices. In Gaiman's graphic novel, the subtle supertextuality is connoting disparadox by employing the very substance of an original Shakespeare – *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Gaiman explores the weight of artistic responsibility through his adaptation where Shakespeare, a character who is aware of the influence his plays wield, not just on contemporary society but on future generations. By including moments that reflect Shakespeare's contemplation of his role as an artist, Gaiman underscores the pressures that come with being a beloved and revered figure in the literary world. Gaiman broadens access to Shakespeare's themes by adapting his works into the graphic novel format. This representation caters to a modern audience, particularly younger readers who may not be familiar with the original plays. Gaiman's dynamic visuals and narrative style can revitalise interest in Shakespeare's texts, demonstrating their adaptability and relevance in contemporary culture. This effort to reinterpret Shakespeare ensures that his works remain vital and engaging for new generations, further solidifying his place as a popular dramatist. By embedding characters like Dream within a context that intersects with contemporary issues of identity, love, and choice, Gaiman reflects ongoing cultural conversations about the nature of storytelling and the role of the artist in society. This commentary is a reflection of a blend of high culture (Shakespeare's work) and aspects of low culture, creating an accessible platform for exploration.

Metafictional lens incorporated here, as characters directly comment on their own existence as creations of Shakespeare. This self-awareness adds layers to the story, akin to modern narratives that explore the relationship between authors and their creations, positioning Shakespeare not merely as an author but as a participant in the mythos of his own character.

Use of Setting in the Adaptation

In terms of enriching the narrative and connecting the themes of both the original play and Gaiman's reinterpretation, *The Sandman* series plays a crucial role. The settings in Gaiman's adaptation are often symbolic, echoing the play's exploration of dualities and contrasts. For instance, the contrast between the structured, rational world of Athens and the chaotic, enchanted forest mirrors the play's themes of love and confusion. The theatrical aspect through the literal setting of a performance has been emphasised by Gaiman. The depiction of the play-within-a-play format in both Shakespeare's and Gaiman's versions serves to highlight the act of storytelling itself. Gaiman's settings often evoke Shakespearean motifs, such as the notion of the "magic forest". By drawing upon these familiar literary landscapes, Gaiman not only pays homage to the original text but also invites readers to re-examine these spaces through a contemporary lens. This intertextual approach enriches the understanding of both the source material and its adaptation, showcasing how settings can carry layered meanings across different narratives.

Through the lens of Jacques Derrida's theory of supplementarity, this representation becomes a profound commentary on the interconnectedness of life and art, challenging the idealised image of the playwright and emphasising that the struggles of the artist are essential elements that contribute to the richness of their work. Gaiman's exploration serves as a critique of the myth of the solitary, heroic artist. Neil Gaiman's portrayal of William Shakespeare in *The Sandman #19* presents the playwright as a deeply flawed, humanised figure rather than the untouchable literary genius he is often remembered as. This deconstruction of Shakespeare's legend aligns with Jacques Derrida's theory of supplementarity, which challenges the idea of self-sufficient meaning and instead argues that presence is always dependent on an external supplement. Shakespeare, as a historical figure and as a character in Gaiman's story, is never truly self-sufficient—his "natural" brilliance is revealed to be dependent on an external source (Morpheus). Instead of being a pure genius, he is a man whose art is artificially supplemented by an outside force, making his success both real and illusory at the same time.

At the end of the graphic novel, Gaiman deconstructs the myth of Shakespeare, showing that behind the legend is a man struggling with absence, sacrifice, and the weight of a legacy that was never truly his own. This aligns perfectly with Derrida's ideas: what readers see as complete or self-sufficient is always supplemented by something outside itself, and what readers assume to be presence is often haunted by absence.

Conclusion

This paper tried to locate the patterns of adaptive continuities in Neil Gaiman's classic re-textualisation of the Shakespearean comedy which primarily dealt with the notion of imagination or fictionality in demarcating the real and the supernatural. Gaiman's text offers useful ways to assess the role of authorship/authorial predicament in the fuzziness of this binary.

The paper develops from a range of textual and theoretical practices to situate how Gaiman recontextualises the paradigm of the popular in an early modern setting. A further inquiry can bring in a more developed idea of metafictionality, self-referentiality and the dream machinery in facilitating this literary popular interface that Gaiman plays with.

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ECHOES OF REPRESSION AND CULTURAL TRAUMA: A NEXPLORATION OF TSEWANGYISHEY PEMBA'S *WHITE CRANE, LEND ME YOUR WINGS*

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Abstract

Anglophone narratives of the past have bestowed Tibet with an identity of 'Exotica Tibet' – as a theocratic and forbidden land of mystery, mysticism and magic. This land of reformers and seekers of truth has fascinated not only travellers but also colonial powers. Since 1959, Tibet has been a living colony experiencing the trauma of repression, displacement and genocide under the Chinese Communists. Tsewang Yishey Pemba's *White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings* is a Tibetan tale of love and war that takes us into the indigenous and hybrid world of Tibet with its guerilla warriors who strive to resist against constraints on their identity, religion and culture. Based on a close reading of the text, this paper attempts to explore the historicity of Tibet's struggle for freedom and sovereignty and the emotional and psychological trauma that the Tibetans have been experiencing for the past half a century.

Keywords: trauma, repression, constraints, identity, struggle.

Trauma narratives have recently enlarged their scope by interpreting trauma experiences in a wider post-colonial and globalised context. Instead of merely addressing genocide and atrocities imparted by the colonists, writings as well as studies tend to focus on the discovery of decolonising strategies such as social activism, psychic resilience and recuperations of trauma victims. The process of decolonisation of trauma is a global transnational struggle, and it includes undoing the structure of colonisation and getting rid of its effects on the native land and people.

Anglophone narratives of the past have bestowed Tibet with an identity of 'Exotica Tibet' – as a theocratic, backward and forbidden corporeal land of mystery and magic. However, this land that closely knits together culture, religion, beliefs and rituals fascinates not only travellers but also colonial powers. Ever since 1959, Tibet has been a living colony under the Chinese communists in a supposedly postcolonial world, and as a result, this spiritual land of reformers and seekers of truth has been experiencing tyranny, cultural repression, displacement and genocide for more than half a century now. Since the Chinese invasion, Tibetan natives have been living in an indefinite world of exile both within and outside their land. They bear the burden of their belated Tibetan identity, and so they thrive to practise personal decolonisation, which in the following half a century has led to a collective cultural decolonisation of trauma in Tibet.

The traumatic repression and tyrannical erasure of the Tibetan religious culture have recently captured the attention of not only native and diasporic Tibetan writers but also writers of other nationalities. As the Tibetan writer and activist Jamyang Norbu, in the Preface to his novel *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes,* writes, "Tibet may lie crushed beneath the dead weight of Chinese tyranny, but the truth about Tibet cannot be easily buried, and even such a strange fragment of history as this may contribute to nailing at least a few lines of the tyrants" (xv-xvi). One such noteworthy personality is the writer Tsewang Yishey Pemba, the founding father of Tibetan English literature and the first Tibetan to become a doctor in Western medicine. Tsewang Yishey Pemba is credited with writing the first work of fiction by a Tibetan in English, *Idols on the Path* (1966). He is also regarded as the first Tibetan to publish a book in English, *Young Days in Tibet,* which was published in 1957.

Pempa's *White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings,* published posthumously in 2017, is a powerful work that symbolises the experience of traumatic repression in Tibet under Chinese occupation. In this paper, I intend to explore and understand the historicity of Tibetans' struggle for freedom and sovereignty as explored by Pemba in this 'Tibetan Tale of Love and War'. The paper is based on a close reading of the text to analyse the socio-political repressive conditions that prevailed in Tibet under Chinese colonialism, the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the Tibetans and how these natives resisted against constraints on their identity, religion and culture.

Set in the breathtakingly beautiful yet unexplored territory of Nyarong Valley of the Kham province of Eastern Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century, *White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings* is an alluring story of Tibetan Nyarong Khampa warriors who are swept away by a tremendous colonial upheaval. The novel takes the readers into the heartland of the Kham region in Eastern Tibet, which is inhabited by a particular Tibetan tribe called the Khampas, who are inborn guerrilla warriors.

As the novel tracks the atrocities of the Chinese on Tibetan natives, this coming-of-age narrative turns into a riveting tale of vengeance, warfare and love unfolded through the life story of two young boys and their family and friends.

The plot is based on a failed Christian mission in Tibet, undertaken by a couple, John Martin Stevens and his wife Mary. The mission was to convert the native Tibetans from Buddhism to Christianity. Though the Bethlehem Lutheran Mission (BLM) in Tibet was similar to any other missions on the Sino-Tibetan borders, which is merely to impart "the triple roles of evangelisation, medicine and education" (70), the novel depicts the irresistible impact of Tibetan culture and religion on the two missionaries during their long stay in Tibet. Pastor Stevens feels that "Nyarong was close to his heart" and that he was "completely part of the Nyarong except for his facial features, blood and bones." (242).

The novel goes deep into the historicity of Tibetan life during their national catastrophe of being invaded by China. Though the Nyarong natives were great warriors, they were peace-loving people; they had very elementary demands – to merely pursue their religion and ways of life: "We, in our Nyarong, want nothing except to live as we have always lived; to lead our own lives and to worship our own gods; to eat our own food and to wear our own dress. Doesn't every human being have a right to that?" (232-233) At the same time, these guerrilla fighters were intolerable to any kind of breach of their basic human rights: "...Don't touchus! But if the Chinese Communists enter our valley, dictate to us what we eat, what to drink, what to worship, what to think, then . . . we retreat into our mountains, and there shall be no rest until every one of us is dead! They'll have to come and get us – one by one!" (233).

Propagating the birth of a New China and of Taiwan, Hainan and Tibet being "in alien able integral parts of the Great Chinese Motherland" (240), the Chinese claimed to be the new Bodhisattvas who were destined to "liberate the Tibetans from feudal, monastic and imperia list exploitation and oppression" (289). For the Chinese, Tibetans were "a population of retarded mentality, permeated with gross primitive religious superstitions" (328). They were declared as

> a primitive race, mostly serfs, ground down by the aristocratic-landowning- theocratic-feudal government, inactive collusion with British-Indian-American imperialists. The Tibetans were an unhealthy race, on account of malnutrition, brought about by economic oppression, aggravated by an a by small ignorance of basic simple hygiene, and further compounded by the ravages of venereal diseases, for the Tibetans were one of the most promiscuous peoples in the world. (326)

So, the PRC proclaimed that their mission in invading Tibet was "Liberation, Enlightenment, Salvation, Nirvana". It is believed that the Chinese Chairman Mao Tse-tung has himself enunciated the "Three Carry Outs" for the Tibetan Region of the PRC– "Indoctrinate. Instruct. Liquidate. ('Indoctrinate the Tibetan people. Instruct the Tibetan National Minority. Liquidate imperialists, aristocrats, religious heads, serf-owners, capitalists, reactionaries." (288)

The scars made by the Chinese on the Tibetans in the name of liberating them were irreparable. The ferocious Golog guerrilla fighter population was reduced to about half. Tibetan rebellions were crushed; more than one lakh Tibetan natives were killed in the labour camps and another fifteen or twenty thousand were killed in the Lhasa uprising. Around two lakhs died due to starvation and overwork. Advance units of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were everywhere on the lookout for "loot, liquor, opium and women" (292). It is even heard that Chinese doctors sterilised Tibetans as part of their liberation programme to carry out alleged genocide in Tibet. They even traded children and sought to forcefully educate children in the Chinese way, saying that they were liberating these young Tibetans from the dreadful hypocrisy of their lives:

> Parent were told that it would serve the best interests of their children if they were taken to the New China, the Great Motherland, to live and study there, so that they may return as future theoreticians, scientists and leaders to build the New Tibet. Parents who protested were castigated as 'reactionaries' and 'counter-revolutionaries' who required immediate 'Mental Rehabilitation'. (343)

Religion and lamaistic orders play a pivotal role in the everyday life of the Tibetans. The Chinese declared religion as the "opium of the people" of Tibet (311) and sought to liberate the Tibetans from the cruel clutches of Buddhist beliefs and rituals. Cruel strategies were exercised to suppress the belief and trust of Tibetans in their religion and self-determination. Monasteries, nunneries, temples, and other cultural and religious institutions, along with religious paraphernalia, were destroyed. Monks, lamas and nuns were humiliated and brutally murdered before the natives:

> The monasteries were derided as the residencies of pampered parasites and relegated to the helminthic classification of tapeworms and roundworms. The incarnate in poches wered enounced as false tingods who enshrined all that was base, evil and superstitious in the Tibetan religion. The monks were castigated for being truculent, corrupt, lazy and arrogant, some of them unashamed homosexuals. They were ordered to come out immediately from their monasteries to work in the fields

and join the workers and peasants in the building of a 'materially modernized, politically democratic and highly civilized socialist Tibet'. (342)

Likewise, monasteries were exploded, and the Chinese labelled monasteries as that which "exploited and oppressed the serf masses and championed ignorance and superstition" (291). They attacked Kunga Rinchen monastery, headed by Tharsel Rinpoche.

Monks were demanded to stop "mumbling a lot of mumbo-jumbo prayers" (291); Duptows were demanded to disband and surrender; and they were all forcefully turned into labourers on the roads and porters for the Chinese caravans in the mountains. The greatest torture of all was the denial of letting the monks go out of the monasteries to relieve themselves. The monks went uncontrollable; they helplessly humiliated themselves before the Chinese soldiers by urinating and defaecating into their robes.

In spite of brave attempts, the Nyarong tribes and guerrilla fighters are destroyed, and the novel culminates with the Chinese taking over Tibet and turning down the monks, lamas and natives of Tibet as exiles in their own homeland. Some flee with their families to various parts of the world, including India. Though attempts were made to seek the help of other nations, including America, for supporting the Tibetan cause, the natives failed. The third-party nations were reluctant to provoke the enmity of the Chinese, who have then risen to power in the world markets.

The novel thus portrays the assertion of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet since 1959. The Chinese communist government's consistent strategies of tyranny and cultural repression to maintain control over both the land and inhabitants of Tibet have led to great and irreparable trauma. In the novel White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings, Tsewang Yishey Pemba displays the collective sharing of Tibetan identity and culture that inspires Tibetan natives to resist repression and decolonise the impacts of trauma. The practice of their Buddhist religion formed the bedrock of Tibetan identity. All strategies were employed to persuade the Tibetans from preaching their religion and its rituals. In simple terms, this novel presents the typical insane and inhuman attitudes of all imperialists towards the natives:

> Not just here in Tibet, not just in China, but everywhere. Millions of us want to be left in peace, in our own homes, with our own families, leading our own lives. But the ways of this cruel bizarre world are not like that. There are always ambitious insane systems and ideologies, and there are always ambitiousin sane men and women ready to follow these doctrines, blindly and fanatically – respect innocence, home and hearth. It ravages everything that' stands in its path. It is such a flood or an earthquake that is about to sweep all of us away...(233)

To conclude, the novel, as the title suggests, voices the desperate plea of Tibetans for transcendence, for the ability to rise above the weight of oppression and the psychological trauma that comes withit. The 'white crane' isa metaphor for freedom, grace, and the longed- for escape from the harsh realities of life under authoritarian control. It is associated with purity, peace, and the ability to soar freely. Likewise, the phrase *"lend me your wings"* reflects the yearning of Tibetans to escape from a life of constant surveillance, fear, and the suppression of cultural identity and expression. It encapsulates the traumatic repression felt by Tibetans who areforced to live under policies that stifle their heritage, language, and spiritual practices. And furthermore, the desire for the crane' swings symbolizes an attempt of Tibetan store gain agency, freedom, and a sense of self that has been suppressed by both physical and emotional trauma.

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDIAN AND CHINESE DRAMA: EXPLORING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

This study conducts a comparative analysis of Indian and Chinese dramas, focusing on their narrative structures, thematic elements, and cultural contexts. Despite the variances in story telling techniques and production quality, both traditions emphasise the principles of family values and social harmony. Indian dramas are characterised by their emphasis on emotional story telling, while Chinese dramas frequently feature complex and layered narratives. The investigation takes into account the cultural, historical, and social contexts that influence dramatic narratives in both countries. It identifies prominent shared themes, such as family values and social harmony, thereby enhancing the understanding of Asian drama traditions. The findings contribute to a more comprehensive insight into cultural representation and narrative expression within these two distinct contexts.

This research holds important implications for the fields of cultural studies and Asian studies, as the comparative analysis elucidates the complexities of cultural exchange and representation in both nations, illustrated through the examination of "The Destiny of White Snake", a Chinese drama, and "Naagin", an Indian drama series.

Keywords: Indian drama, Chinese drama, comparative analysis, narrative structures, cultural contexts, Asian media studies.

Introduction

Drama is a written work that tells a story through actions and speech and is meant to be acted on stages. It is a significant form of storytelling that effectively incorporates performance, dialogue, and action to convey intricate emotions, themes, and ideas. This is typically a simple way to tell a story in dramatic way. There are five recognized types of drama: comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, and musical drama. The origin of drama is in ancient Athens.

Chinese dramas, widely referred to as C-dramas, have seen a remarkable rise in global popularity. This is attributed to their engaging storylines, well-developed characters, and high production values. Types of Chinese Dramas are Wuxia, Xianxia, Romance, Historical. Some of the Notable Chinese Dramas are *The Legend of Miyue* (2015), *Nirvana in Fire* (2015), *The Untamed* (2019). Chinese drama becomes very popular globally due to its genre; set in the ancient dynasty era, it involves conflicts, elements of romance, fantasy and action to tell a unique story.

Indian drama, commonly known as Indian serials, encompasses a diverse range of television dramas produced in India. These can be categorized as follows: Daily Soaps, Mythological Dramas, Historical Dramas, Romantic Dramas and Social Dramas. Indian dramas are characterized by their ability to blend traditional values with contemporary narratives, contributing significantly to the cultural discourse. Some of the Notable Indian dramas are "Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi", "Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii", "Naagin". Indian dramas are widely popular in India, the Middle East, and among the Indian diaspora.

Some of the similarities between Chinese and Indian dramas are family values, melodrama, romance and cultural heritage. Both Chinese and Indian dramas offer unique storytelling styles, cultural insights, and emotional resonance, appealing to diverse audiences worldwide. But Chinese dramas are widely known all over the world and popular among youngsters.

Aim

Through this study we are exploring the similarities and differences of Chinese and Indian dramas. For the further study we took the Chinese drama *The Destiny of White Snake* and the Indian drama *Naagin.*

Chinese Dramas

China has been making great dramas for many decades. The first Chinese television drama was ***A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake*** (1958), a single-episode drama about a girl who teaches her sister not to waste food, as part of the Chinese Communist Party's effort to promote frugality. The first serial drama was ***Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp*** (1981), a 9-episode action-thriller, but it was not popular with audiences. Wuxia literally means "martial heroes".

Wuxia stories are about martial artists, usually set in ancient times, who fight to uphold a code of ethics. Wuxia evolved from xiayi fiction, which originated about 2000 years ago. Xianxia literally means "immortal heroes". Xianxia stories feature martial arts, but they have more fantasy elements than wuxia stories. Xianxia stories feature magical beings such as gods and demons, and characters often cultivate to gain immortality or strength.

Chinese drama is a highly traditional form of drama in China and is considered one of the most quintessential art forms with national characteristics and styles. Chinese dramas have a penchant for featuring historical and fantasy plots. C-dramas are usually based on books and web novels. China is quite famous for its television dramas. Chinese dramas, popularly known as C-dramas, are popularly broadcast throughout Asia on the television screen.

China produces huge numbers of live-action dramas, both as web series and broadcast on television, each year. In recent years, many have been adapted from C-novels. In addition to their popularity in China, C-Drama fandoms have been pulling in increasing numbers of international fans, particularly from the mid-2010s onwards, as series are subtitled and internationalised.

The Destiny of White Snake (2018)

In a breathtaking tale of love and sacrifice, we meet Zi Xuan, the esteemed master of the medicinal valley and a devoted disciple of the Jade Emperor. His journey towards deityhood takes an unexpected turn when he crosses paths with Bai Yao Yao, a captivating white snake spirit masquerading as a human. Though Yao Yao never planned to fall for a mortal, destiny often leads us to the most astonishing connections.

Zi Xuan and Yao Yao seem destined for a beautiful life together, but their burgeoning happiness is jeopardised by Fa Hai, a relentless demon catcher hell-bent on tearing them apart. In a heart-wrenching twist, Yao Yao, determined to protect the mortal she loves, breaks a heavenly seal, unleashing chaos upon the human realm. Faced with devastating consequences, Zi Xuan makes the ultimate sacrifice, leaving Yao Yao to navigate an eternity of heartache on her own.

A millennium passes before Yao Yao musters the courage to roam among humans once more. During her poignant journey, she discovers Zi Xuan, who has been reborn as Xu Xian. Although the echoes of his past life are lost to him, Yao Yao carries their shared memories like a beacon of hope. This time, she is determined to rewrite their fate, igniting a story of second chances and undying love.

Indian Dramas

Indian drama represents a captivating and dynamic art form that intricately blends music, dance, and acting, drawing from its profound roots in classical Sanskrit traditions and vital texts like the Natya Shastra. With a remarkable history that spans millennia, Indian drama has continuously transformed, embracing a breadth of influences from diverse regions, languages, and cultures.

From the ancient Vedic Aryans' performances of revered epics like the Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata, and Ramayana to today's innovative theatrical productions, Indian drama encapsulates the spirit of change and adaptation. Each performance is alive with rhythmic movements, expressive gestures, and enchanting melodies that captivate audiences and stir emotions.

This rich tapestry includes various forms, such as folk theatre—exemplified by Ramlila and Koodiyattam—which reflects the heart of community traditions, classical theatre with its grandiose presentations and stylised acting, and modern theatre that speaks boldly to contemporary social and political realities.

Indian drama is not merely entertainment; it is a powerful medium for storytelling, cultural expression, and social commentary that resonates deeply with audiences. As it continues to evolve and thrive, this art form inspires, challenges, and unites people across the nation, making it an essential part of India's cultural identity. Embrace the vibrant world of Indian drama, where every performance offers a chance to connect, reflect, and dream.

Naagin (2015)

Naagin stands out as a captivating Indian supernatural fiction television series that explores the fascinating world of shape-shifting serpents. Produced by the talented Ekta Kapoor under Balaji Telefilms, the show has successfully captivated audiences across six seasons, with a highly anticipated seventh season already announced. Each season masterfully delves into the compelling themes of revenge and love, offering a unique and engaging storyline that keeps viewers on the edge of their seats. And for the further comparison, we took season 1 of *Naagin*.

Shivanya and Shesha are on a mission to avenge the brutal murder of Shivanya's parents by the Rahejas and their accomplices, a tragedy that unfolded twenty years ago during a failed attempt to seize the Naagmani. In a bold move, Shivanya marries Ritik on his wedding day, setting the stage for both revenge and unforeseen romance as she finds herself falling for him. As the plot thickens, Shesha, living in Shivanya's guise, also becomes enamoured with Ritik, creating a powerful emotional conflict.

The sisters soon uncover the shocking truth that Ritik belongs to the Suryavanshi lineage, further complicating their quest for vengeance. In a stunning twist, it is revealed that Yamini is the elusive fifth murderer. Alongside her husband Ankush, she not only murdered Ritik's mother but also kidnapped him and held Sangram captive for years, all in pursuit of Naagmani.

As the stakes rise, Sesha turns against Shivanya, but the revelation of Yamini's true intentions rekindles a deep bond between Ritik and Shivanya. Their love culminates in a passionate union, which unfortunately strips Shivanya of her powers, transforming her into a mere human. In a heroic act, Ritik reunites with Sangram, who sacrifices his life to restore Shivanya's powers for a crucial 12-hour battle over Naagmani.

With newfound strength, Shivanya confronts and kills Yamini, finally avenging her family's death. Meanwhile, Sesha allies with the Mahishmatis clan, but Shivanya proves her dominance, ultimately defeating Sesha, who is then imprisoned by the Mahishmatis for the next 25 years. The tale of revenge, love, and betrayal unfolds with relentless intensity.

Similarities Between Chinese and Indian Dramas

Indian and Chinese dramas reveal fascinating parallels that showcase the depth of their cultural heritage. Both traditions place a strong emphasis on family values and draw richly from mythology and folklore, using music and dance as powerful tools to evoke deep emotions. Their storytelling is characterised by melodrama, social commentary, and historical references, making them not only entertaining but also thought-provoking.

Moreover, these dramas adopt a serial format that captivates audiences, employing symbolism and metaphor to enhance emotional engagement. The ongoing cultural exchange between India and China is evident, with each tradition influencing the other—Indian dramas seamlessly integrating elements of Chinese culture and vice versa. This exchange underscores the shared values and timeless storytelling traditions that bind these two ancient civilisations together. Embracing these dramas allows us to appreciate our commonalities while celebrating our unique narratives.

Indian and Chinese dramas are more than just entertainment; they are a profound celebration of family connections and social harmony, deeply rooted in traditional values that resonate with viewers across generations. By skilfully weaving ancient myths, legends, and folktales into their narratives, these cultures create captivating stories that not only entertain but also strengthen ties to cultural heritage.

Music and dance play a pivotal role in these dramas, acting as powerful vehicles for emotional expression and storytelling that enrich the viewing experience. The use of melodrama captivates audiences, featuring unexpected twists and heightened emotions that keep them on the edge of their seats, eagerly anticipating what comes next.

Through their compelling narratives, Indian and Chinese dramas tackle pressing social issues such as inequality, corruption, and the complexities of cultural identity. By seamlessly integrating historical and cultural references, they do more than entertain—they invite viewers to engage with and appreciate the rich tapestries of their legacies.

The serialised storytelling format draws audiences in over multiple episodes, allowing for intricate character development and a deeper emotional investment. Both traditions masterfully utilise symbolism and metaphor, enabling complex themes and intense emotions to resonate profoundly with viewers.

Ultimately, Indian and Chinese dramas place a premium on forging emotional connections, aiming to evoke heartfelt responses that linger long after the credits roll. The interplay between these two vibrant traditions highlights a rich tapestry of cultural exchange, where their unique elements blend harmoniously, enhancing the storytelling landscape.

This rich interplay underscores profound shared values, themes, and storytelling traditions that link Indian and Chinese dramas, inviting audiences to explore and truly appreciate the depth and beauty of both cultures. These dramas are not just stories; they are invitations to connect, reflect, and celebrate the universal experiences that unite us all.

The Similarities Between *The Destony of White Snake* and *Naagin*

1. Mythological Inspirations: Both dramas are steeped in rich mythological narratives, with "Naagin" drawing from the depths of Hindu mythology and The Destiny of White Snake weaving together the enchanting threads of Chinese folklore.

2. Supernatural Intrigue: Each show introduces viewers to a captivating world of the supernatural, featuring shape-shifting serpents in "Naagin" and formidable demons in "The Destiny of White Snake".

3. Romance and Complex Relationships: Love takes centre stage in both narratives, where "Naagin" explores Shivanya's heartfelt attachment to Ritik, while "The Destiny of White Snake" delves into the intricate love triangle involving Bai Suzhen, Xu Xian, and Fahai.

4. Clash of Light and Darkness: At the heart of these stories is an epic struggle between good and evil. Shivanya stands resolute against sinister forces *Naagin*, and Bai Suzhen valiantly confronts the demons threatening her world in "The Destiny of White Snake".

5. Fantasy and Adventure Unleashed: These dramas transport viewers into realms of fantasy and adventure; *Naagin* dazzles with its magical abilities, while "The Destiny of White Snake" captivates with its breathtaking battles and mythical beings.

6. Empowered Female Leads: Both series shine a spotlight on strong, independent heroines. Shivanya and Bai Suzhen not only drive their stories forward but also embody the fierce determination to protect their loved ones.

7. Emotional Depth and Melodrama: Known for their emotional resonance, both dramas are enriched with dramatic plot twists in *Naagin* and deeply touching moments in *The Destiny of White Snake,* ensuring an unforgettable viewing experience.

These compelling similarities underscore the universal themes and elements that connect *Naagin* and *The Destiny of White Snake,* showcasing their profound cultural significance and emotional relatability across diverse audiences.

Differences Between Chinese and Indian Dramas

Indian and Chinese dramas present a fascinating study in contrasts, each offering unique storytelling experiences that capture their respective cultures. Indian dramas are characterised by their slower, more deliberate pace, immersing viewers in deep emotional narratives and extensive character arcs. In contrast, Chinese dramas excel with a brisker tempo, packed with exhilarating action, surprising plot twists, and gripping suspense that keeps audiences on the edge of their seats.

The storytelling techniques also diverge significantly: Indian dramas often indulge in melodrama, showcasing heightened emotions that resonate powerfully with viewers, while Chinese dramas prioritise intricate character-driven narratives filled with complexity and nuance. These fundamental differences reflect the rich cultural tapestries from which they originate; Indian dramas draw inspiration from Hindu mythology and the vibrant world of Bollywood, while Chinese dramas bring to life their own mythological tales and historical narratives.

In terms of production quality, Chinese dramas frequently set the bar high with superior cinematography and sophisticated special effects, outpacing their Indian counterparts that focus more on emotional resonance. Episode structure also varies; Indian dramas typically boast longer runtimes with an episodic format, while Chinese dramas lean towards shorter, serialised storytelling that promotes rapid engagement.

Target audiences are another critical aspect—Indian dramas primarily cater to domestic viewers, whereas Chinese dramas are making significant strides in capturing international audiences. Language plays a pivotal role here too; Indian dramas are often produced in a plethora of regional languages, ensuring accessibility through dubbing and subtitles, while Chinese dramas predominantly showcase the richness of the Mandarin language.

Both industries navigate the challenging terrain of censorship, though it is the Chinese government's stringent control over content that stands out. Interestingly, the global presence of Chinese dramas is rapidly expanding, supported by international collaborations—a trend that is still evolving in the Indian drama landscape. While Indian dramas hold immense popularity within India and its diaspora, they have yet to achieve the same level of worldwide recognition as their Chinese counterparts. The compelling storytelling and cultural depth offered by both forms invite viewers to explore their unique narratives and embrace the diversity of global entertainment.

The Differences Between *The Destiny of White Snake* and *Naagin*

1. Mythological Foundations: Both dramas are deeply rooted in mythology, yet they originate from contrasting traditions. *Naagin* draws from the rich tapestry of Hindu mythology, highlighting the fascinating concept of shape-shifting serpents (IchchhadhariNaags). In contrast, "The Destiny of White Snake" immerses viewers in Chinese folklore, specifically the enchanting legend of the White Snake.

2. Atmospheric Tone: *Naagin* captivates with its darker, suspense-laden atmosphere, emphasising themes of revenge and supernatural thrills that keep audiences on the edge of their seats. On the other hand, "The Destiny of White Snake" offers a more harmonious tone, seamlessly blending action, romance, and fantasy to create an engaging experience.

3. **Storytelling Approach:** *Naagin* enthrals its audience with a fast-paced, episodic storytelling style, ensuring each instalment ends on a tantalising cliffhanger. In contrast, "The Destiny of White Snake" adopts a more deliberate, character-focused narrative that allows for deeper emotional engagement and development.

4. Character Depth: Each drama showcases formidable female leads, yet they differ significantly in their development. Shivanya from "Naagin" is primarily driven by a quest for revenge and the protection of her loved ones. Conversely, Bai Suzhen in "The Destiny of White Snake" is portrayed with greater complexity, inviting a more profound exploration of her emotions and motivations.

5. Cultural Insights: These dramas beautifully reflect their unique cultural contexts. "Naagin" immerses viewers in Indian cultural practices, traditions, and societal values, while "The Destiny of White Snake" celebrates Chinese customs, mythology, and philosophical pursuits.

6. Visual Production Quality: The cinematic quality of *The Destiny of White Snake* is nothing short of breathtaking, featuring impressive visual effects and exhilarating action sequences. While *Naagin* also boasts commendable production values, its focus leans more towards emotional drama and compelling plot twists.

7. Audience Appeal: *Naagin* primarily resonates with an Indian audience, crafted around themes of family and melodrama, making it a staple for family viewing. In contrast, "The Destiny of White Snake" seeks to captivate a wider, international audience, emphasising action, adventure, and fantasy elements that transcend cultural boundaries.

Findings

Naagin and *The Destiny of White Snake* exhibit noteworthy similarities in their inspiration drawn from mythology and folklore, incorporating supernatural elements and featuring strong female protagonists. Both narratives explore themes of love, revenge, and self-discovery, often expressed through music, dance, and melodrama.

However, they diverge significantly in their mythological contexts; *Naagin* is rooted in Hindu mythology, while *The Destiny of White Snake* is influenced by Chinese folklore. Additionally, the tone and atmosphere of Naagin lean towards a darker and more suspenseful narrative, contrasting with the more balanced tone present in The Destiny of White Snake.

Further distinctions can be observed in areas such as storytelling style, character development, cultural nuances, production quality, and target audience. These variations highlight broader differences between Indian and Chinese dramas, with Indian dramas typically demonstrating a slower pacing and more melodramatic elements, whereas Chinese dramas tend to be faster-paced and more centred on character-driven narratives."

Conclusion

The comparison between Indian dramas, such as *Naagin*, and Chinese dramas, like *The Destiny of White Snake*, unveils a rich tapestry of both similarities and differences. While these productions arise from distinct cultural and mythological backgrounds, they share notable commonalities in their incorporation of mythology, supernatural elements, and the prominence of strong female protagonists. Moreover, the integration of music, dance, and melodrama serves as a unifying theme across both traditions.

Nonetheless, observable differences in tone, narrative style, and cultural nuances reflect the unique characteristics inherent to each tradition. Ultimately, the interplay of similarities and differences between Indian and Chinese dramas highlights the diversity and richness of Asian storytelling, providing a fascinating insight into the cultural heritage and values of these two ancient civilisations.

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THE EVOLUTION OF POPULAR CULTURE: FROM TRADITION TO THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract:

This study critically examines the transformation of popular culture in the digital era, exploring the interplay between traditional and digital-age cultural forms. Technological advancement leads us to examine the world through different lenses, where we evaluate the transformation drawn from literature, music, film, art and culture. The journey from the traditional era to the digital world highlights the frequent changes not only in our external modification but also in internal shifts in consciousness, perception and embodiment. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the impact of digital technologies on popular culture and how they influenced the dissemination, creation and consumption of cultural artefacts. The revolutionary changes which take place for the advancement of society and betterment of humankind can be observed on the path which leads us from traditional to global. The digital age has witnessed the emergence of a global popular culture, fuelled by the widespread adoption of digital technologies and the increasing interconnectedness of the world's populations, cultures and economies. The findings highlight the complex dynamics of cultural production and consumption in the digital era, revealing both the democratising potential of digital platforms and the enduring significance of traditional cultural forms.

Keywords: Popular culture, Digital age, Traditional era, Technological advancement

1. Introduction:

Popular culture has undergone a profound transformation from the traditional era to the digital age. The postmodern era, influenced by the rise of post-industrial capitalism, globalization and electronic media, further facilitated the evolution of popular culture, fostering a diverse and digitized cultural landscape. Today, we observe the digital age, inspired by streaming platforms, social media and mobile technologies has emerged global popular culture that is at once interactive, interconnected and incessantly evolving. This paper explores the key social, technological and economic factors that amplified this transformation by tracing the development of popular culture.

Traditional era in which we adhere to past practices as traditional values and beliefs, traditional morality and traditional methods are still deeply rooted in our heart and soul. Our traditional cultures are very rich and ideal which we observe through literature, art and music though we travelled from traditional to modern era. The transformation has necessitated a paradigmatic shift in the way we interact, we observe information and also the way we live. Traditional culture was influenced by oral traditions, and was based on community practices while digitalization has democratized access to information. Advancement in the Educational, social and economic field can be viewed by the use of digital platforms through knowledge sharing and global connectivity. The interconnectedness enriched by global connectivity has enabled the vast adoption of ideas and innovations, thereby promoting cultural diversity. Technological advancements lead us to examine the world from different lenses where we evaluate the transformation drawn from literature, film, music, art and culture. The advancements brought revolutionary changes in the mentioned areas.

While the preservation of cultural heritage is essential in the digital era for the development of human culture, society and identity. The swift evolution of technology and communication altered the modalities of citizens to interact and engage with one another. This alteration is predominantly ascribed to the proliferation of social media, an artefact of the digital epoch propelled by the internet. The journey from the traditional era to the digital world highlights the frequent changes not only in our external modification but also in internal shifts in consciousness, perception and embodiment. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the impact of digital technologies on popular culture and how they influenced the dissemination, creation and consumption of cultural artefacts. The existing transformation of digital sources which lead us from localised to globalised. It delineates the advent of a new world marked by the rapidity and availability of communication, precipitating a notable transformation in social interactions. This transformation has engendered the notion of digital citizenship, wherein individuals navigate their roles and obligations within a digital framework. Overall, the introduction constructs a persuasive context for the digital age, enabling the widespread dissemination of cultural content via digital platforms.

2. Methods:

This research applies to literature study methods. It emphasises the strength of the concepts interpreted based on the writings that lead to the discussion. The method of analysing uses details from books and journals.

3. Result and Discussion:

3.1 Need for Digital Literacy-

In the twenty-first century, digital literacy has become one of the important parts of human existence. To prioritise digital literacy in the curriculum, educational institutions should teach digital skills. The method not only eases the teaching – learning process but also standardises the critical thinking of students. A myriad of sociocultural transformations persist due to the pervasive influence of globalisation and the dissemination of information. Digital technology facilitates enhanced connectivity within communities to communicate, collaborate and do creative work. Digital literacy encompasses a set of knowledge and skills possessed by individuals to evaluate, comprehend, and utilise information with ethical consideration to facilitate communication and interaction in ordinary life. The competence of digital literacy is an essential prerequisite for citizens in dealing with the challenges posed by contemporary life in the 21st century. In the text "Digital Citizenship in School", it is posited that digital literacy constitutes the paramount aspect of technological comprehension, enabling citizens to apply technology in an appropriate method. It is noted that there exists a common phenomenon where highly advanced technology is often accompanied by a lack of expertise in its appropriate usage. In this context, technology can be observed as a double-edged sword. On one edge, it empowers individuals to communicate with family, friends, and colleagues within a minimum interval of time, whereas it also introduces dangers such as cybercrime, disinformation campaigns, and fraudulent activities.

Hence, an acute awareness and competency among people is essential, as a lack of prudent response to these threats can violate the rights of others and jeopardise national stability. Therefore, it can be declared that digital literacy represents vital life skills that citizens must promote to ensure that the structure of their lives fosters a critical and creative mindset, in that way positively enhancing social and cultural dynamics in a secure manner. This approach is necessary to cultivate responsible digital citizens for the future to deal with the challenges posed by the digital world.

3.2 Economic strength of popular culture in global age:

The revolutionary changes which take place for the advancement of society and betterment of humankind can be observed on the path which leads us from traditional to global. The digital age has witnessed the emergence of a global popular culture, fuelled by the widespread adoption of digital technologies and the increasing interconnectedness of the world's populations, cultures and economies. The traditional era was characterised by face-to-face communication, print media, and temporal limitations, whereas the global era presented unrestricted access to information. Digital communication has exceeded geographical constraints, and it facilitates trade, cultural exchange and remote collaboration. The rise of social platforms like YouTube and TikTok has become a platform for opening a great number of job opportunities for citizens. Such platforms have become the origin of the dissemination of music, video, memes and democratised cultural production. Social media and user-generated content have enabled people to create and share their creative ideas in a global market which provides them an opportunity to learn and earn. This has provided strength to marginalised communities to participate in the global economy and has transformed the way we shop, enabling us to buy the best goods and services according to our requirements and desires from any part of the world. What distinctly differentiates digital popular culture from its historical predecessors is the unprecedented mass production of entertainment and pleasure that is now accessible to the masses, previously unattainable. Furthermore, in the digital era, popular culture is characterised by market-orientated endeavours focused at generating substantial profits, while individual achievement is indeed attributed to those people who attain considerable wealth through the provision of such entertainment. The transformative digital advancements in music, art, film, communication and transportation have equipped billions of consumers with digital devices such as computers, smart television sets and smartphones. Additionally, these developments have facilitated both personal means – notably the automobile – and public means – exemplified by the aeroplane – which have fundamentally restructured our perception of distance and the essence of travel. The ensuing discussion is a historical analysis of this phenomenon, which possesses global significance. The force that renders much of this development feasible is often undetectable and silent yet omnipresent.

Empowering Cultural Industry:

The advent of digital technology has significantly empowered a multitude of stakeholders within the cultural industry, including consumers, creators and producers. This empowerment facilitates enhanced cultural communication and social interactions, thereby leading to a more dynamic cultural landscape. The assimilation of digital technology has improved the efficiency of the cultural industry. Digital tools have made it easier for content creators to produce and share their content to a global audience. This enhancement is particularly evident in the central component of cultural production, making digital communication the predominant mode of cultural transmission.

The present discourse articulates that digital technology has reshaped the architecture of cultural consumption. This transformation encompasses changes in the modalities through which cultural products are consumed with the dynamics prevailing within the cultural market, thereby affecting the equilibrium between domestic and foreign cultural influences.

A critical question posited within the discourse is whether the advancements in digital technology will lead to the production of high-quality cultural content. While technology can produce impressive outcomes, there is concern that it may not invariably result in cultivating rich content. However, the relentless quest for quality by creators and demand from the consumers are expected to engender the emergence of remarkable cultural works. The discourse expresses that the confluence of digitisation and technology possesses the potential to create an open cultural milieu filled with diverse cultures. This environment has the potential to engender cultural peaks characterised by profound intellectual thought and exceptional artistic expression, showcasing the zenith of what the digital era is capable of presenting.

3.4 Emerging Creative Expression:

Digital technology has enabled new forms of music, art and storytelling. The medium and techniques applied to the traditional era in artistic creations were predominantly executed using tangible materials such as wood, stone, canvas and metal. The methodologies encompassed oil painting, sculpture and printmaking. Whereas the contemporary art scene is created by computer-generated imagery, three-dimensional modelling and algorithmic art. Digital painting using software such as Adobe, Photoshop, and Procreate improved the artistic level to new heights, and digital platforms facilitated global artistic exposure, which provided new opportunities for creative art creators to monetise.

Music which soothes our heart, soul and mind is one of the important parts of a human's life. Earlier music was preserved through handwritten and printed sheet music. The instrumentation used to play music was violin, pipe organ, and lute, whereas digital-age studios have reshaped music production, and the composition of music is based on loops and samples. Today many streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Wynk Music, have become the predominant source of music distribution.

Every individual has gained opportunities through platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud to advance their creative skills by showcasing independent publishing. Furthermore, AI-assisted processes in mixing and vocal synthesis are becoming commonplace. This discourse expresses that digital platforms have not only democratised content but also revolutionised the way we consume cultural content.

Digital technology has also enabled various new forms of storytelling and distribution in the film industry. Historically, the practice of storytelling was largely confined to literature, theatrical performances, radio, oral traditions and subsequently visual media such as film and television. These forms were more passive – individuals would sit back and assimilate the narrative as it was presented to them. Although the digital age has facilitated a wide range of new platforms for the dissemination of narratives. Social media and video-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and even interactive video games have become fundamental instruments for storytelling. Presently, any individual who possesses a smartphone or computer can articulate their story, facilitated by such platforms and blogging sites.

This democratisation has led to a significant proliferation in the diversity of voices and perspectives in storytelling, creating opportunities for under-respected or marginalised groups to articulate their experiences. The internet has engendered an unparalleled level of global interconnectedness, allowing narratives to traverse geographical boundaries in seconds. Global content can achieve viral status, and local stories can discover international audiences. Korean pop, for instance, has spread from South Korea to become a worldwide phenomenon, and narratives like Squid Game have found extensive global audiences despite being in a foreign language. Digital technology has transformed the art, film and music industry with the rise of streaming services and digital platforms. The rise of e-books and online publishing has transformed the publishing industry as well. Digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have invested heavily in original content and enabled experimentation with innovative storytelling formats, styles and genres.

It provided opportunity to those emerging and struggling creators who possess the ability to show their talent but not the right platform. Many Indian shows on streaming platforms, such as Panchayat, Gullak, Laapata Ladies, and Dupahiya, are powerful and heartwarming shows that celebrate rural culture, strong family ties, childhood memories, and real-life issues. These shows provide us the chance to connect with our culture and its original beauty.

The rise of streaming platforms has led to innovation and improvement in content quality, and these subscription-based models have enabled revenue streams for the film industry. Overall, digitalisation has transformed the art, music and film industry, providing numerous opportunities for creators and redefining the way content is produced, disseminated and consumed.

3.5 Opportunities and Challenges:

The Digital Age, often referred to as The Information Age, signifies a transformative shift in human society from traditional industrial economies to those propelled by digital technologies and the exchange of information. The pervasive use of the internet, artificial intelligence, mobile technology, and extensive data analytics has led to profound alterations in nearly every aspect of our lives – encompassing education, communication, commerce, healthcare and governance. These technological advancements have brought extraordinary prospects for inclusion, innovation and economic growth. They simultaneously present complex challenges that necessitate rigorous scrutiny and regulatory oversight.

One of the most prominent advantages of the digital era is the communication and connectivity. Video conferencing tools, social media platforms and instant texting tools have provided real-time engagement among individuals, instead of geographical locations. This has promoted the rise of remote employment and the establishment of online communities.

The Digital Age enhanced accessibility to information and educational resources. The rise of e-learning platforms and open educational resources has democratised the dissemination of knowledge, providing learning opportunities that are more accessible for individuals in the geographic and economic context. Artificial Intelligence and Automation have also enhanced productivity across industries, while in the field of healthcare, the emergence of the digital age has facilitated the widespread adoption of electronic health records, wearable health monitoring devices and telemedicine, thereby improving both access to patient outcomes and healthcare services.

Despite these advantages, the digital age presents several challenges for us. A deficiency in digital literacy can further marginalise individuals, preventing their full engagement in the digital economy. Wide adoption of artificial intelligence in every field of our life is another critical challenge rising for individuals, causing displacement of jobs and their existence, especially positions that entail routine work or manual tasks. Issues related to data security and privacy are also challenging, as personal information is frequently stored and shared by corporations without adequate transparency. The digital age has also engendered ethical dilemmas, particularly algorithmic bias, concerning misinformation and digital well-being. The development of artificial intelligence raises questions about transparency and accountability. The excessive use of digital devices creates several physical and mental health-related issues, such as depression, anxiety, vision loss, sleep disruption, sedentary lifestyle, social isolation and technology addiction.

The digital age offers remarkable advancements and global interconnectedness, democratising access to information, education, commerce, and cultural exchange. However, it also presents complex challenges that require careful management to harness its potential while mitigating its risks.

4. Conclusion:

The evolution of popular culture in the digital era has been a transformative phenomenon. The expansion of digital technologies has democratised the production, dissemination and consumption of popular culture, emerging new forms of creative expression, social interaction and cultural exchange. This paper has demonstrated that digitalisation has witnessed a significant shift in the way popular culture is created and consumed. The rise of streaming platforms and social media has enabled new forms of participatory culture, where consumers are increasingly empowered to contribute to the creation of popular culture.

Ultimately, the evolution of popular culture in the digital era presents a complex and dynamic landscape that is depicted by both opportunities and challenges. As research scholars, it is our responsibility to critically examine these developments and explore the ways through which popular culture can be harnessed as a force for cultural diversity, social change and creative empowerment.

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NOSTALGIA AS SOLACE IN KHALED HOSSEINI'S *SEA PRAYER* AND TISHANI DOSHI'S "THE IMMIGRANT'S SONG"

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Abstract

Nostalgia is a powerful tool which offers solace to many people who are uprooted from their homelands due to various reasons. Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan-American writer, in his genre-merging work, *Sea Prayer*, portrays how a hapless father talks to his young son while waiting for a boat to take them to safe shores. The father fondly remembers their home space while waiting to embark on a dangerous voyage. He wishes for a lot of things which his young son could bring to his memory. Similarly, in Tishani Doshi's poem, "The Immigrant's Song", the immigrant tries to indulge in nostalgia in a unique way. The paper explores the trauma related to displacement and the ways of the minds to recapture sanity in a hostile world.

Key words: nostalgia, trauma, displacement, home space, collective memory

Migration is a phenomenon which has existed for time immemorial. People migrate for various reasons like financial gains, political unrest in one's homeland, civil strife and a better standard of living. Diaspora writers have portrayed the mindscapes of immigrants through their works. The trauma associated with displacement has moved the minds of people across the world. The increasing unrest in many parts of the world has fuelled large-scale migration in recent times. This has resulted in unrest among receiving societies also. The Refugee population has strained the resources of many developed countries. Cultural amalgamation of the immigrants is another sensitive issue which countries have to grapple with. In this paper, two works related to the mind frame of immigrants are analysed to explore the role of nostalgia in adapting to the new environment in which immigrants are thrown into. Tishani Doshi's poem, "The Immigrant's Song", portrays the urge of the immigrant to reminisce on the home memories and shun the painful memories at the same time. In Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*, a hapless father, on the verge of a perilous journey to a safe haven, tries to recollect the good memories of home which he wishes to communicate to his son, Marwan. Both works offer in-depth glimpses of the mind frames of ordinary human beings in utmost misery. The resilience offered by the immigrants also finds mention in the works.

Tishani Doshi opens her poem in the negative. The immigrant urges the fellow immigrants not to speak of the good lives they had while in their home country. But this is followed by a description of their routine in their mother land. The mention of coffee beans -filled morning, clothes in washing lines, the leaves of baobab trees, the first smell of rain and the nameless birds fills one with nostalgia. The good things of life are juxtaposed with tense memories. The immigrant compares mothers' headscarves hanging on the washing line to white flags which could mean surrender in war. Similarly, images of trouble come to the readers' minds in lines mentioning "men, stolen from their beds at night". The immigrant warns his fellows not to utter the word 'disappeared'. Doshi italicizes the word to bring the gravity of the situation in homeland to the readers' mind. Later, the speaker warns his fellows not to name their dead friends because naming them is not going to bring them back. It can only cause misery to the living.

The need to integrate with the receiving society finds expression in the poem. The second stanza depicts the topic of discussion with their new brothers. They should not be burdened with sad tales of the immigrants' home land. Instead, the topic of discussion should be their current lives. Even while putting forth this idea, the immigrant mentions, 'war' and 'abandonment'. These words are pointers to the tough life they once had. The speaker hopes for a future in which grandchildren ask them to narrate their lives in their mother land. Their question marks the beginning of a down pour of memories. The longing to speak about their home land is evident in the way the poet ends the poem. The stories which are narrated to the grandchildren will reverberate in the whole world. It will be passed on from person to person till the world is filled with their stories. The Nature itself takes interest in spreading their life stories. On this note the poet ends the poem. The innate desire of the immigrants to spread their life stories to people around the world can be gauged in the last part of the poem.

The inherent behaviour of first- and second-generation immigrants also finds subtle reference in the poem. The first-generation migrants are keen to reflect on their past though outwardly the immigrant in the poem restricts any such thoughts. The second or the third-generation immigrants integrate in the adopted lands in better ways.

The poet uses 'forked tongues' to refer to the languages used by the immigrant's grandchildren. They are well versed in the language of the adopted land. At the same time, they may be using the mother tongue of their grandparents while interacting with the older generation. The interest in knowing an unknown past which the previous generations reminisce upon may arise in them.

The grand parents take it as an opportunity to relive their past. The ties with the homeland remain stronger with them when compared to that of the third generation. This can often lead to nostalgic memories of their past which the next generations may find it difficult to comprehend. The poet may also have experienced home sickness while being away from her homeland for educational purposes. Her acumen, while living in different countries, would have helped her present the mindscapes of immigrants in the poem. The poem ends on a touching note with the immigrant hoping that his story will reverberate in the world. The poet cleverly uses a powerful hyperbole to convey the urge of the immigrant to spread his story around the world. The memory is set afloat in a paper boat. The hope is that the paper will whisper his story to the water; the water in turn will convey it to the trees. The trees certainly will howl the story to the leaves. It is said that if you keep still, your story can be heard amidst the world. The depth of the immigrant's desire to relive his past life is depicted through the hyperbole.

The plight of the immigrant is portrayed empathetically by Tishani Doshi. The longing for the lost world is etched in the memory of the immigrant. He tries to get along with his new brothers in his adopted land because he has burnt his boat. The situation in his home land is not conducive to a peaceful life in most cases. So, he explores ways to survive in his adopted land. The present life gains significance over his past. Integration with the host community is of paramount importance. The immigrant mentions breaking bread at cafes and homes with their new brothers. The rustic scenery transforms to "gates and bridges and stores", in the new world. Amalgamation with receiving societies is not very easy. But the urge to set up a safe home for the next generations often takes precedence over one's own sentiments for one's homeland. The disturbing thoughts about, "men, stolen from their beds at night" and "disappeared" remain engraved in the memory of the immigrant. But these are consciously pushed to the back of his mind so as to get along with his new life. Reliving of the immigrant's past life may happen on a conscious note only when his grandchildren express a desire to know their roots. Then nostalgia takes up the role of a balm thus offering solace to the traumatic mind.

In Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*, the author has portrayed the mind of a hapless father, who is about to take a perilous journey by boat with his young son, Marwan. While waiting for the boat, he talks to his son about his beautiful childhood in his native place, Homs. The siblings used to lie down in the terrace of Marwan's grandfather's house. The morning sounds were welcoming. The stirring of olive trees in the breeze, the bleating of grandmother's goats and the clanking of pots in the kitchen bring back nostalgic memories of a normal life. Now these aspects of the ordinary life are much desired by Marwan's father. He wishes his son also had such a childhood where there was no threat to his life. Even before leaving the mother land, the protagonist brings to his memory the good life which he once had. Marwan does not have the good fortune to enjoy an ordinary life which his father once enjoyed with his uncles. The boy was taken to his grandfather's house when he was a toddler. So, it is only natural that he could not remember his visit. But his father narrates it so that he himself can once again live in the cherished memory.

The father recollects how Marwan's mother showed him a herd of cows grazing in a field, with a lot of wild flowers. He becomes nostalgic about the dams he and his siblings built in a nearby creek. Marwan was too young to remember the farm house and their wanderings in the locality. The soot covered stone walls of his father's house are still etched in Marwan's father's memory. These recollections of his home give way to that of the old city. He narrates about the mosque, the church and the most important place for gatherings, the *souq* or the market place. He further travels down the memory lane where the smell of fried food tickles his senses. The evening walk which they took with Marwan around Clock Tower Square is also mentioned here. The protagonist is jolted to reality at this point of time with the thought that the beautiful life he has described to his son has become a dream even for him. He compares the situation to "some long-dissolved rumor". The air of tension takes over the soothing memories of yester years with the protests and the siege of their hometown. What follows is even gruesome. Bombings, starvation and death have become the routine, which have forced them to find asylum in another country. Marwan knows about the current situation as he is old enough to remember and understand the terrible times they are going through at the moment.

People adapt to their present situation as the father describes how the bomb crater is made into a swimming pool and the fact that dark blood is better than bright. The implication here is to the killings of ordinary people. In a heart-wrenching way, Marwan's father says about finding close relatives amidst concrete and beams which is the aftermath of bombings. Thus, the exodus starts to find a safe place to live. He mentions about Marwan's mother who is also waiting on the moonlit beach to catch a boat to safety. They are surrounded by people speaking different languages.

These are pointers to the gravity of the situation. There is political unrest in a lot of countries, including Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Syria. It is to be noted that Hosseini belongs to Afghanistan and the inspiration for the work has come from the drowning of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who was in a similar situation as Marwan is in the story. The author brings to the forefront the plight of refugees through his work. The dichotomy of the situation is set down in the lines, "All of us impatient for sunrise, all of us in dread of it" (Hosseini). The nightmarish journey may not take them to a safe country.

Many like Kurdi drown on the way and never reach their new home. In their adopted land, they are not exactly welcome. They may have to travel to another country which is willing to take them. Marwan's mother thinks that such unwelcome behaviour from the people would not have existed if they had seen even half of what they had. Refugee issues certainly require a sensitive approach.

Marwan's father is helpless to protect his son from the perilous voyage which they should undertake to reach a safe shore. But he reassures his son that nothing will happen while he holds his father's hand. Even while saying so, the father is worried about the depth of the ocean and the rough sea which they have to cross. The only thing he can do is to pray for the safety of his loved ones. He describes Marwan as "precious cargo" and expects the sea to know this. The trauma associated with leaving one's home land and the uncertainty of safely reaching the destination are etched in the memory of the readers while the novel comes to a close. Hosseini has succeeded in drawing the attention of the world to the perpetual immigrant issues.

Similar to Tishani Doshi's poem, Hosseini's novel also takes the readers to man-made issues. At the receiving end also, there are human beings. The situation arises due to human activities, but the world is yet to learn from its past mistakes. The human spirit is never broken by difficult situations. It finds ways to get over traumatic feelings. That is where nostalgia comes to play. In both the poem and the novel, the power of human mind is portrayed. The reliving of pleasant experiences in the past helps people find solace during hardships. Ordinary life situations gain extraordinary relevance during war times. This is pointed out by Sampriti Sarkar in her article, "Unfurling Stories of Endurance: A Review of "Sea Prayer" by Khaled Hosseini". The description of the market place in Homs where Marwan's family visited frequently is, "a lush tapestry of an ordinary world transformed extraordinary by its contrast with the now war-ravaged city" (Sarkar). Additionally, the illustrations in the novel add to the nostalgic elements. The reader gets a glimpse of what ordinary life was in Marwan's home land before the war. Hosseini's work can be termed as a graphic novelette considering the illustrations and the length of the work. Certain pages are left with pictures alone. The form of the work adds to the nostalgic elements where the protagonist feels deeply for the normal lives they once had. His strong desire to keep these memories alive through repeating it to his son is very touching.

The role of collective memory cannot be down played in this context. Immigrants often prefer to stay together in the adopted land so as to find some comfort in companionship. This leads to ghettos being formed in the adopted lands. The rituals and functions of their home land often find ways into the new land. Cultural differences may prove a hindrance to total integration. But this slowly dissolves with each passing generation. The ways of the mind are bizarre. However, they point to man's desire to move on with his life even in the midst of adversities.

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UNITY AND CONFLICT IN FOOTBALL: A STUDY OF EL CLÁSICO AND ITS SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Sports have always had the incredible power to both bring people together and drive them apart in ways that go beyond basic rivalry. Football, in particular, tends to tap into something deeper—something that brings people together through passion while also revealing the fractureswithin. It's not just about the game; it is also about what it represents and how it reflects theconflicts and triumphs of society at large. The heated rivalry between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, known as El Clásico, is the perfect illustration of how football can be so much morethan just a game. Sports can also act as a mirror to the political, cultural, and geographicdivisions in our globe, as demonstrated by the emotions it arouses, including pride and conflict. This paper intends to examine El Clásico as a potent illustration of how football in particular, and sports in general, represent the ways in which societies are both cohesive and divided, exposing the underlying forces that mold identities.

Keywords: Football, El Clásico, Conflict, Identity, Politics

Introduction

Sports have always had the unique ability to both unite and divide people in ways that go beyond mere competition. On the plus side, they bring followers from various backgrounds together via mutual support and shared experience. International events such as the Olympics or the World Cup bring people from different countries together on a global scale, unifying them in their patriotism. However, this same excitement can lead to conflict, since intense rivalries between teams or nations can occasionally devolve into animosity or even violence. Furthermore, sports can mirror broader societal concerns, with individuals or teams representing greater cultural or political conflicts, which exacerbates polarization. Football, in particular, appeals to something much deeper, bringing people together around a shared interest while simultaneously exposing more profound divisions. It is more than simply the game; it symbolizes something greater and the larger challenges and triumphs of society. The game becomes a cultural platform when supporters view their teams as representations of their values, history, and goals. However, football also has a propensity to exacerbate social tensions since intense rivalries can reflect underlying political, class, or national divisions. The game offers insight into the global situation by revealing the complex dance between harmony and conflict via its triumphs and defeats. The heated rivalry between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, known as El Clásico, exemplifies how football can be more than just a sport. It is a manifestation of long-standing cultural, political, and historical conflicts between the two clubs and their respective regions, making it much more than just a straightforward game. Fans of both clubs as well as the larger Spanish community are moved and passionate by the duel, which is a spectacle that goes beyond sports. El Clásico is a struggle for pride, identity, and dominance that reflects larger social conflicts that frequently find their way into the public consciousness. This legendary match serves as an example of how football can be a powerful lens through which to examine the intersections of politics, history, and culture.

El Clásico: The Legacy of the Spanish Civil War and Political Division

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936, when right-wing military officers attempted to overthrow Spain's progressive government, which had been elected earlier that year. The war quickly divided the country, with the Nationalists, led by General Francisco Franco, opposing a centralized fascist state and the Republicans, backed by a coalition of socialists, communists, and anarchists, advocating democratic changes. The war lasted until 1939, when the Nationalists were victorious and Franco founded an authoritarian dictatorship that lasted until his death in 1975. The divide between Nationalists and Republicans was not only political, but also deeply cultural, with regional identities such as Catalonia's strong desire for independence at odds with Franco's vision of a united Spain. This historical context is important in comprehending the intense football rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, El Clásico. The origins of this fierce football rivalry are traced back to the political and social divisions during the Spanish Civil War. FC Barcelona, based in Catalonia, was a symbol of resistance to Franco's regime. Barcelona, with their unique culture and active independence cause, saw more in Barcelona football club than meets the eye—more of an emblem of the struggle for free regional autonomy rather than a purely sporting organization. Real Madrid, meanwhile, stationed in the national capital of Spain, Madrid, was perceived by many as espousing the cause of centralists within Franco's regime.

Franco saw Real Madrid as a way to further his goal of a united Spain, which included suppressing regional identities, particularly Catalan nationalism. Real Madrid's victories were celebrated as a testament to the regime's might under his rule, and the team was utilized as a vehicle for patriotic propaganda. The phenomenon of El Clásico was brought about by the political tensions surrounding the Spanish Civil War, as the match between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid was more than just a simple sporting event.

It came to represent Spain's broader political and cultural tensions. Real Madrid became a symbol of Franco's Spanish state, whereas Barcelona, with its motto "Més que un club" (More than a club), carried the burden of Catalan identity. With each El Clásico game between the two teams evolving into a battlefield for more extensive ideological and political disputes, the rivalry gradually spread beyond the football field. The history of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's subsequent administration strongly influenced the development of this rivalry into one of the most politicized and extensively watched football games in the world.

El Clásico: A Clash of Ideologies, Values, and Identities

Historical and Cultural Identity

Spanish nationalism and the centralized vision of Spain have long been linked to Real Madrid. Many people view the club as a symbol of Spanish unity because of its connections to the Spanish monarchy and the Francoist era (1939–75). Real Madrid was frequently seen as the club of the establishment under Franco's dictatorship, with institutional and governmental support. The idea of representing Spain as a whole, emphasizing status and international achievement, and frequently signifying the power of the Spanish state, helped to establish the club's identity.

The Catalan identity, on the other hand, has long been entwined with Barcelona. As a representation of Catalan pride and cultural resistance, the club's motto, "Més que un club" ("More than a club"), captures this essence. Barcelona developed into a hub for Catalan autonomy and resistance during the Franco era, when the Catalan language and culture were suppressed. Many see Barcelona not only as a football team but also as a political organization that embodies the aspiration for regional autonomy and cultural recognition within Spain because of the club's strong ties to Catalan independence and its function as a cultural emblem for Catalonia.

Footballing Philosophy and Style of Play

Real Madrid's football philosophy, which is exemplified by its Galáctico approach, has frequently placed an emphasis on individual talent and star power. The team has concentrated on luring the top players in the world, like David Beckham, Zinedine Zidane, and Cristiano Ronaldo, in order to keep its supremacy and appeal on a global scale. Real Madrid has always had a more individualized approach to football, winning games through counter attacking tactics and flashes of exceptional skill. This strategy demonstrates an appreciation for both global stars and individual brilliance.

Barcelona, on the other hand, has prioritized youth development, collaboration, and technical proficiency, which is exemplified by their recognizable tiki-taka football style. La Masia, Barcelona's famed youth academy, has been the foundation of the team's success. It develops domestic talent and instills a philosophy of possession-based football and teamwork. Long-term growth and the advancement of new talent are prioritized, demonstrating a dedication to sustainability and a preference for teamwork over individualism. Cohesion, systematic play, and nurturing local talent are the keys to Barcelona's success.

Inclusivity and Social Responsibility

Real Madrid is frequently regarded as a luxury brand that stands for both financial achievement and elite status. Its attraction to admirers around the world is highlighted by its historical associations with the mainstream and global marketability. While its fan base is increasingly international and diversified, the club has prioritized economic power, making money through worldwide tours, global sponsorships, and commercial deals. However, rather than emphasizing social issues or ethnic diversity, Real Madrid's inclusivity has frequently been perceived as being more motivated by economic considerations.

In contrast, Barcelona adopts a far more socially inclusive approach that extends beyond football. The club has a strong commitment to diversity in athletics, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and human rights. It has worked hard to serve as a forum for social responsibility and activism. The club is a prime example of a more comprehensive approach to diversity through programs like its collaboration with UNICEF, Barcelona's Foundation for Social Causes, and its efforts to support women's football. The club's commitment to social justice and cultural responsibility is demonstrated by its support of refugees, advocacy for equality, and sustainability.

Political and Social Ideology

Many people view Real Madrid as a representation of Spanish nationalism and political concentration. The club's status as the establishment emblem in Spain has been conditioned by its historical ties to the Spanish monarchy and its identification with Francoist Spain. In sharp contrast to Catalonia's demands for independence, Real Madrid's identity is linked to the central Spanish state and frequently embraces a vision of unification and centralized governance.

Barcelona is a symbol of Catalan aspirations for autonomy and self-determination in Spain. The club has historically been seen as a political platform for Catalan nationalism, as it is a strong supporter of Catalonia's independence. Barcelona's ties to Catalan identity, culture, and language have made it a symbol of Catalan opposition to Madrid's attempts at centralization, particularly during Franco's reign when the team became a symbol of Catalan defiance.

Economic Power and Global Appeal

Real Madrid is all about worldwide prestige. In order to ensure economic success, its focus has always been on creating a global brand and acquiring global superstars. The club's ability to amass enormous wealth and a worldwide fan base is a testament to its desire to be a renowned organization both inside and outside of sports. Real Madrid is more of a commercial corporation than a sporting institution because its business strategy has historically been centered on acquiring big-name players and creating a worldwide reputation.

Barcelona is a worldwide brand as well, but its approach has been grounded in its cultural identity and social conscience. As part of its worldwide influence, it has prioritized youth development, community engagement, and social causes, establishing itself as a club that values responsibility and inclusivity. In addition to its success as a football team, Barcelona has achieved commercial success as a cultural symbol of issues like LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and human rights, which reflects the club's larger social goal.

Footballing Legacy and Success

Real Madrid is the most successful club in European football history, as well as the UEFA Champions League, where it has won the most trophies (15). Because of its success in Europe, it has established itself as a football powerhouse that aims to win significant awards each year. Trophies and honors are the foundation of Real Madrid's identity, and the brand's legacy is shaped by individual stars, Galácticos, and high-profile signings.

Barcelona's philosophy of play is the foundation of its legacy, especially in the modern era. Pep Guardiola's tiki-taka strategy, which prioritized possession football, technical skill, and unity, helped the team achieve previously unheard-of levels of success. The club's success, particularly in the 2000s and 2010s, was based on Lionel Messi's brilliance as well as the idea that football is a team sport in which the power of a cohesive team triumphs over the quality of any one player. An integrated, systematic and beautiful approach to the game is essential to the Barcelona heritage.

A potent emblem of the deep cultural, political, and historical divisions that have molded Spain—particularly the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing political unrest—is El Clásico, the intense rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. With Real Madrid standing for Spanish nationalism, unity, and the concentration of power, and Barcelona for Catalan pride, regional autonomy, and opposition to Madrid's political centralism, this long-standing historical background set the stage for El Clásico to become more than just a football game. The rivalry eventually came to represent opposing football ideologies as well. Real Madrid, which is frequently regarded as a symbol of elite status and financial success, placed a similar emphasis on individual talent and worldwide star power. As a cultural ambassador for Catalonia and its wider social principles, Barcelona, on the other hand, adopted a collective ideology that was focused on youth development, teamwork, and a dedication to social inclusivity and activism.

El Clásico offers a potent illustration of how football, and sport in general, reflect broader societal divisions and similarities, exposing the mechanics of belonging and the forces behind identities. Sport serves as a microcosm for the conflict between social cohesiveness and division, and the game is more than just a contest for dominance; it is a spectacle that magnifies larger cultural, political, and social conflicts. Both clubs' intense rivalry unites their respective fan bases, fostering a feeling of identity and community. While Barcelona supporters find common ground in their regional pride and commitment to independence and inclusivity, Real Madrid supporters unite behind the cause of Spanish unity and global achievement. However, El Clásico also splits at the same moment. It contributes to political tensions, generates intense hostility, and widens the gap between Catalan nationalism and Spanish centralism.

In this sense, El Clásico serves as an illustration of how, despite fostering solidarity, sports also deepen societal divisions. It demonstrates how sports both bring people together and widens their divisions as well.

Conclusion

El Clásico is more than just a football game between the most illustrious and successful teams in the world. The game functions as a sort of microcosm of the conflict between centralism and regional autonomy, unity, and independence by reflecting the political, cultural, and ideological conflicts that have defined Spain. Football and sport in general became the arena for larger social, political, and cultural conflicts as a result of this legendary rivalry. Two conceptions of Spanish identity are represented by Real Madrid and Barcelona: the first is elite and international, while the second is regional pride, resistance, and even social activism. The complexity of identity and belonging is best illustrated by El Clásico, when intense passions unite fans in solidarity, yet also fuel division and animosity. It highlights how sport can intensify the forces that shape society, providing a space for cohesiveness while also reflecting the vast divisions that persist in the broader social and cultural context. Through its continuous spectacle, El Clásico remains a testament to how sport transcends the actual game and reveals the intricate relationship between politics, society, and identity.

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EXPLORING DIVERSITY, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of diversity, gender, and identity in contemporary popular culture, focusing on how media such as television, film, and music influence societal perceptions of these themes. Through case studies of popular television series like Pose and Euphoria and the rise of gender-fluid icons such as Harry Styles and Billie Eilish, the paper examines how these cultural products challenge traditional notions of gender, race, and sexuality. The study highlights the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ characters, people of colour, and non-binary individuals, analysing how these portrayals reshape public understanding of identity. Additionally, the paper addresses the role of popular culture in both reinforcing and dismantling stereotypes, noting how marginalised communities are using media to assert their narratives and drive social change. By analysing audience engagement, particularly through social media and fan movements, the paper demonstrates how popular culture serves as a platform for activism and social transformation. This presentation underscores the importance of critically engaging with media representations to foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of diversity, gender, and identity in today's cultural landscape.

Keywords: The Politics of Diversity, Gender and Identity in Contemporary Popular Culture.

Introduction

Popular culture—encompassing media forms such as film, television, music, and digital platforms—serves as a crucial site for the construction and dissemination of social meanings, shaping how societies understand themselves and others.

Despite increasing discourse on inclusion and representation, popular culture continues to reflect systemic inequalities and dominant power structures. Marginalised communities are frequently under-represented or misrepresented, while dominant social groups maintain significant influence over narrative production. In this context, media does not merely entertain; it educates and reinforces, or occasionally disrupts, cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and identity.

This presentation aims to critically analyse how diversity, gender, and identity are depicted within popular culture. By interrogating these representations, we can better understand the extent to which media either challenges or upholds social hierarchies and the implications this holds for cultural discourse and societal change.

Analysis

The representation of diversity in popular culture is essential to understanding how media shapes perceptions of race, ethnicity, culture, and social difference. While claims of progress are often made, mainstream media remains deeply entrenched in practices that perpetuate exclusion and stereotype marginalised communities.

Film and television, in particular, have historically privileged Eurocentric narratives. Although recent productions, such as Black Panther (2018) and Crazy Rich Asians (2018), have foregrounded non-white protagonists and culturally specific storylines, these works remain notable for their rarity. Scholars critique such moments as indicative of a broader trend of commodifying diversity for global markets, rather than dismantling the systemic barriers that have long excluded these narratives.

In the music industry, the incorporation of diverse genres like hip-hop, reggaeton, and Afrobeats into mainstream culture raises important questions about cultural appropriation. These genres, often rooted in resistance and socio-political commentary, are frequently commercialised in ways that disconnect them from their origins, benefiting corporate interests over the communities that created them.

Digital platforms such as social media present a dual reality. They both replicate structural inequalities—through algorithmic biases that prioritise dominant voices—and serve as tools of empowerment. Movements such as #OscarsSoWhite and #RepresentationMatters have brought critical attention to exclusionary practices in cultural industries, demonstrating the power of digital activism in amplifying marginalised voices and advocating for meaningful change.

Ultimately, diversity in popular culture cannot be assessed solely by who appears on screen or stage but must consider the quality, context, and control of those representations. Without addressing the underlying systems of power, diversity risks becoming a superficial gesture rather than a substantive shift toward equity.

Gender representation in popular culture remains a persistent site of negotiation, reflecting and shaping societal norms regarding femininity, masculinity, and non-binary identities. Despite the rise of feminist critiques and calls for inclusivity, media continues to perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes across genres and formats.

Popular film and television often reinforce normative gender expectations. Female characters are frequently confined to roles defined by appearance, emotional labour, or subordination to male leads. Similarly, representations of masculinity often valorise aggression, dominance, and emotional repression. These portrayals not only reflect societal gender norms but actively participate in their reproduction.

LGBTQ+ representation has experienced notable growth, with an increasing presence of queer characters and storylines. However, this visibility remains uneven and frequently problematic. Stereotypical depictions, tokenism, and the framing of queer identities as either tragic or exceptional persist. Moreover, representation tends to prioritise cisgender, white, and male experiences, leaving the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities underexplored.

In other cultural domains such as fashion and gaming, we observe shifting attitudes toward gender expression. Fashion has increasingly embraced androgyny and gender-fluid aesthetics, challenging binary conceptions of dress and identity. Likewise, segments of the gaming industry have begun creating more inclusive avatars and narratives, though sexism and harassment remain widespread issues within gaming communities.

Collectively, these examples highlight the ongoing struggle over gender in popular culture. While progress has been made, media representations continue to oscillate between reinforcing and resisting traditional gender ideologies. As such, the analysis of gender in popular culture must remain attentive to both advancements and the enduring constraints of hegemonic gender norms.

Popular culture not only reflects societal identities but also plays an active role in shaping how individuals perceive and present themselves. The concept of identity in media studies refers to how people understand themselves in relation to the cultural narratives that surround them, often negotiating multiple and intersecting aspects of selfhood.

Celebrity culture, for instance, significantly influences identity formation. Celebrities serve as aspirational figures, with their curated images promoting particular lifestyles, body ideals, and social values. While some public figures use their platforms to advocate for diversity and social justice, celebrity culture often reinforces neoliberal ideals of individualism and consumerism, positioning personal branding as the ultimate form of self-realisation.

Social media has further complicated identity construction by allowing individuals to curate their own public personas. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter provide tools for self-representation, enabling users to engage in identity play, community building, and activism. However, these digital spaces also impose pressures to conform to prevailing aesthetics and trends, frequently prioritising visibility over authenticity.

The concept of intersectionality is particularly useful in analysing identity in popular culture, as it accounts for the overlapping dimensions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability that shape individual experiences. Media often fail to adequately represent these complexities, favouring simplified narratives that obscure the lived realities of people whose identities do not fit into singular categories.

As such, identity in popular culture is a site of both possibility and limitation, offering opportunities for self-expression while simultaneously constraining those expressions within marketable and socially acceptable frameworks.

Despite increased awareness around issues of diversity, gender, and identity in media, several challenges continue to undermine authentic representation. One significant issue is tokenism, where marginalised characters are included to create the appearance of diversity without meaningful narrative depth. Similarly, performative activism, wherein media industries make symbolic gestures toward social justice without structural change, has become increasingly prevalent.

The rise of cancel culture further complicates discussions of representation. While some argue that public accountability is necessary to challenge harmful behaviours and practices, others contend that cancel culture often prioritises punishment over education and dialogue, potentially silencing nuanced critique. The binary framing of individuals as either "cancelled" or "redeemed" reduces complex social issues to spectacle, diverting attention from systemic problems.

These challenges highlight the need for sustained critical engagement with popular culture, moving beyond surface-level inclusion to address the underlying economic and social structures that shape cultural production.

Beyond representation in media content, diversity in popular culture also intersects with questions of production and authorship. It is critical to examine who controls the means of production—the writers, directors, producers, and executives who determine which stories are told and how. Despite increased visibility of diverse characters on-screen, decision-making power in cultural industries often remains concentrated within dominant groups, which affects the authenticity and depth of diverse portrayals.

Furthermore, the global flow of media complicates how diversity is perceived. Media products increasingly circulate across borders, leading to both the globalisation of cultural forms and tensions around cultural homogenisation. While global platforms like Netflix and Spotify offer space for local narratives to reach international audiences, they also prioritise content that aligns with global market interests, sometimes flattening cultural specificity to make it more universally consumable.

A deeper analysis of gender in popular culture reveals the persistence of post-feminist sensibilities, where media narratives often suggest that gender equality has already been achieved, rendering feminist critique obsolete. This can lead to the depiction of female empowerment as a matter of individual consumer choice rather than systemic change. For example, media frequently promotes the "strong female character" archetype, who embodies physical or emotional toughness, yet her empowerment is often still framed within patriarchal norms, such as through sexualisation or romantic subplots.

Additionally, transgender and non-binary representations remain limited and frequently problematic. Trans characters, when included, are often confined to narratives of transition, trauma, or victimhood, rather than being depicted in the full range of human experience. This reinforces the marginalisation of trans identities by portraying them as exceptions or spectacles rather than as ordinary parts of diverse societies.

Popular culture plays a fundamental role in shaping consumer identities through branding and lifestyle marketing. Media texts frequently link identity formation to consumption practices, encouraging individuals to "find themselves" through products, fashion, and entertainment preferences. This dynamic promotes what scholars' term "identity capitalism", wherein difference and individuality are monetised while systemic inequalities are obscured.

Moreover, the concept of cultural hybridity is important when considering identity in popular culture. Many media texts reflect the blending of cultural traditions, languages, and practices, especially among diasporic communities. Hybrid identities challenge static or essentialist notions of culture by highlighting how identity is fluid, evolving through cross-cultural interaction. However, hybridity is also co-opted by corporations to create marketable "fusion" aesthetics that can dilute political meanings of cultural blending.

Fan cultures are increasingly important spaces for identity work. Online fandoms allow marginalised groups to reinterpret media texts through practices like fan fiction, cosplay, and transformative commentary. Through these practices, fans negotiate identities in ways that resist mainstream media's limitations, creating alternative representations and inclusive imaginaries that fill gaps left by traditional media industries.

In addition to representation and authorship, diversity in popular culture must also be understood through the lens of structural inequality in audience reception. Media content does not exist in a vacuum; it interacts with audiences who interpret texts differently based on their own cultural positions. For example, racialised audiences may experience what scholars call "representational fatigue", where repetitive stereotypes or limited narratives of their identities create psychological harm over time.

Moreover, diversity is often framed within market logic, where inclusion is motivated by profitability rather than social justice. This leads to what some critics describe as "diversity washing", in which brands or media entities highlight minor visible changes—such as casting a person of colour in a leading role—while deeper inequities in storytelling, pay equity, and workplace culture persist.

Additionally, there is growing concern over the digital divide and its impact on diversity. While social media and streaming services provide more opportunities for marginalised creators to share their work, unequal access to technology, funding, and global distribution limits whose stories are heard and whose cultural expressions become globally recognised.

Beyond post-feminist narratives and trans representation, another critical layer in gender analysis is the portrayal of care work and emotional labour in media. Popular culture often neglects the gendered expectations surrounding care roles, disproportionately assigning them to female characters without critical examination of how these roles sustain patriarchal systems.

Additionally, there is a resurgence of hypermasculine archetypes in popular culture, particularly in response to shifting gender norms. Films, video games, and online communities sometimes reassert aggressive or dominant masculinities as a form of backlash against feminist progress, fuelling what is often called "toxic masculinity". This phenomenon is exacerbated by the rise of online subcultures such as the "manosphere", which openly resist gender inclusivity and promote regressive ideals.

Popular culture increasingly appropriates queer aesthetics without necessarily supporting queer people. Fashion brands, music videos, and advertising campaigns use queer-coded visuals and language to appear progressive, but this is often detached from political commitments to LGBTQ+ rights, reducing queerness to a marketable style.

When examining identity, it is essential to consider the growing phenomenon of algorithmic identity formation. Online platforms curate content based on user data, which not only reflects but shapes how individuals understand themselves. Algorithms reinforce certain interests, aesthetics, and political positions, contributing to what scholars' term "filter bubbles", where people receive tailored cultural content that affirms, rather than challenges, their existing identities.

Another dimension is the gamification of identity in social media culture. Individuals are encouraged to perform and optimise their identities for likes, follows, and shares. This turns identity into a competitive, gamified process, rewarding those who can package their difference or uniqueness into the most engaging online persona.

There is also a growing field of critique around diasporic identities in popular culture. Media created by and for diasporic communities' challenges nationalistic and monolithic ideas of culture by emphasising transnational belonging, hybridity, and fluidity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, popular culture remains a powerful arena through which social identities are both reflected and constructed. The representations of diversity, gender, and identity within media not only mirror societal values but actively participate in shaping them. While there have been strides toward greater inclusivity, these developments often remain constrained by underlying systems of power, commercial interests, and entrenched ideologies.

Critical engagement with popular culture is essential in order to push beyond superficial gestures of representation and toward genuine structural transformation. By fostering more complex, authentic, and equitable cultural narratives, media can better reflect the diversity of human experience and contribute to broader social change.

The exploration of diversity, gender, and identity in popular culture reveals a complex and dynamic landscape where power, representation, and resistance are constantly negotiated. While notable progress has been made in increasing visibility and inclusion across various media forms, these advances remain uneven and frequently shaped by commercial imperatives rather than genuine commitments to equity and justice. Popular culture, as both a product and producer of societal values, operates within larger structural inequalities that often limit the transformative potential of diverse representation.

Moreover, critical engagement with popular culture demonstrates that diversity is not merely about numerical inclusion or surface-level visibility but about the meaningful integration of marginalised voices in the processes of creation, decision-making, and narrative control. Without this, media risks reinforcing tokenism and perpetuating simplified or harmful depictions of under-represented groups.

Gender representations continue to oscillate between progress and regression, with persistent stereotypes, post-feminist individualism, and the commodification of feminist and queer aesthetics undermining more radical possibilities for change. Similarly, identity within popular culture is increasingly mediated through digital technologies, where algorithmic curation and social media economies encourage the commodification of selfhood and reinforce existing social divisions.

Ultimately, popular culture remains a vital site of ideological struggle. It is both a mirror and a maker of social realities, capable of reinforcing dominant power structures as well as challenging them. Therefore, ongoing critical analysis is essential to interrogate not only what stories are told, but how, by whom, and for what purposes.

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DANS LE NOIR: A REDISCOVERY OF TASTES

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Abstract

Dark Dining is a phenomenon in which people are served food in complete darkness by visually challenged waiters. This concept gained fame when Jorge Spielmann opened the first Dark Dining restaurant in Zurich in 1999 (Allen 86). Spielmann's primary aim was to raise awareness on blindness and provide a job for the visually challenged. However, his idea opened new vistas on understanding individual perceptions of taste, smell and touch, thus enhancing gastronomic pleasure for the people who are experiencing this extravaganza. Furthermore, dining in extreme darkness, hosted and served by visually impaired waiters, alters one's perspective of the world. Table sharing becomes never an issue as the darkness allows the guests to speak frankly to strangers without being judged. Since no one is watching them, the customers feel a kind of innate freedom to experience the food in their own way rather than focusing on table manners. This paper is an effort to present my thesis that our vision often tricks us to believe a distasteful food to be unique and palpable to the taste buds. Many restaurants serve us cuisines in an ornate form creating a visual beauty. It is this magic veil which curbs us to believe the food to be tasty. Moreover, the focus of taste while eating slips into oblivion with the intrusion of TV and smart phones. The paper opens a portal to analyse and rediscover contemporary sensibilities of real taste which is slowly diminishing.

Keywords: *Renewal, Palate, Blindfolded eating, Colour, Flavour, Visual dominance, EL Method, Eating rooms*

"…smell and taste are in fact but a single composite sense, whose laboratory is the mouth and its chimney the nose…"

– (Savarin 10)

Blindness is not a matter of pleasantry. According to 2021 report of *The Lancet Global Health*, it is estimated that about 43.3 million people had blindness (Bourne 130). It is possible that the numbers might have increased during the last four years. On this account, it is important to note that blind people often find it difficult to find jobs and are forced to depend on their families and relatives for any act of benevolence and support. They are people who are often considered by the public to be quite unworthy of fulfilling any job in this world where vision plays a major role. But what if there is some work which only a blind person could do, one which requires the skill of a man of no vision? This is where the concept of *Dark Dining* becomes relevant.

Though the phenomenon of dinner in the dark dates back to the eighteenth century, it found its proper path only in the twentieth century and is continuing strongly as a trend day by day. *Dark Dining* is a social experiment in which people are served food in complete darkness by visually challenged waiters. Michel Reilhac was the first one to develop such a programme for diners called *Le Gout du Noir* (which means The Taste of Darkness), thus raising the first non-permanent restaurant in France in 1999 (Lepoittevin). But much before that, the idea took its origin in 1998 during the *Dialog im Dunkeln* (*Dialogue in the Dark*) exhibition at the Zurich Museum of Design. Here the visitors of the museum are led in groups by blind guides through specially constructed dark rooms where scent, sound, wind, temperature, and texture convey the characteristics of daily environments—a park, a city, a boat cruise, or a bar. Noted for its enthusiasm, the event ignited a new idea of creating jobs for visually impaired people. Consequently, the idea was implemented by the *Blind-Liecht* foundation to open a restaurant, bar, and platform for education and culture in the dark in a former Methodist chapel in Zurich. Thus, blind clergyman Jorge Spielmann opened the first permanent restaurant, *Blindekuh* (*Blind Cow*), in Switzerland in 1999. This was followed by the *Unsicht* (*Invisible*) Bar in Cologne, Germany in 2001. But it was Edouard de Brogile, a French entrepreneur, who made it universally popular by opening a restaurant chain called *Dans Le Noir* (*In the Dark*) in 2004 in Paris with the help of the Paul Guinot Foundation for Blind People (Spence and Fiszman 251). When compared to the former ones, this one offered the best culinary experience, which made it more popular. As a result, it has opened its branches in London, Barcelona, New York, Moscow, Barcelons, Auckland, Melbourne, Nairobi and Warsaw (Fabricant).

Dark dining restaurants in India can be found in a variety of metropolitan cities, including "Dine in the Dark" at Pan Asian in Delhi, "Seeing in the Dark" in Ahmedabad, "Spice Studio" at Alila Diwa Hotel in Goa, "Dark-Dine Invisible" in Bangalore, "Taste of Darkness" at Dialogue in the Dark in Hyderabad, and "On the Rocks" at Sheraton Hotel & Towers in Chennai, to name a few.

Analysing the origin of these types of restaurants, it is really clear that such an endeavour was not undertaken instinctively, but with the utmost care and empiricism in mind. For instance, to an eater or a gourmand, the senses of taste, smell, touch, and sight trigger an image of the food, which is vital to his identification, synthesis, and enjoyment of a dish. What will happen if one of these senses is removed? Does the absence of that sense amplify the other senses? The answers to these questions might be two-fold and unimportant. The focus therefore lies in understanding how privileged we are to indulge in this discussion when so many are devoid of one or more senses and have adapted well to a world that demands the usage of all five. The pioneers of dark dining, such as Axel Rudolph, a psychologist, and Spielmann, aimed for this empathic approach. Their primary aim was not only to provide jobs for the visually impaired but also to shed some light on the sensory world of the blind. The blind never needed pity, but understanding them and trying to smell, touch, and taste by existing in their own world for at least an hour can make a big difference to our understanding of life in totality. It will enable us to experience and, thereby, appreciate them for their bravery and confidence. Along with this, it also opened a never-before-seen exploration of the supposed heightening of the senses of taste, smell, and touch that occurs when sighted people are deprived of vision.

The ambience of these types of restaurants is completely different from the usual ones, as most of them are kept in complete darkness, with all sources of light eliminated, including mobile phones and cameras. For instance, *Dans Le Noir* London has blacked-out windows but a lit reception where the customer can store his/her coat, bag, and phone in lockers. In other venues, the customers are blindfolded instead. Before entering, customers choose their dishes, often selecting from among several basic menus rather than specific items.

Many dark restaurants employ blind or visually impaired waiters and guides, whose conditions allow them to work comfortably in the dark. Still, most of them has to undergo extensive training before taking up the task, as particular emphasis is given to safety measures because of the nature of the restaurant. According to LeTrent, they engage themselves in "a two-month training period, memorising the layout of the room and how to set and bus tables" before becoming a waiter (LeTrent).

The waiter at these dark-dining restaurants behaves akin to any other normal restaurant waiter. Here he/she becomes the guide for the customers. To enter the restaurant, one client holds the waiter's shoulders. Then, the next one holds the shoulder of the first client. Soon, the guests form a line behind the waiter. Then, the waiter begins to walk. He/She leads the guests into the dining room, which is very dark. At many dark-dining restaurants, guests do not eat alone. As the tables are very large, everyone sits together. So, people may sit next to someone they have never met. Eating and talking with strangers might be a problem for some, but sitting in the dark, they feel differently. People feel that they can speak without being judged (Spotlight English). As they cannot be seen by others, they will do certain things that they would not normally do. They find a kind of freedom in the dark room.

After having made them sit at their respective tables, the waiter gives only a vague clue as to what the menu is but gives more information on the position of spoons, knives, glasses, etc. to avoid any confusion. To prevent over-spilling when wine or water is poured into the glasses, the waiter comes up with the suggestion that the guests could put their thumb at the edge of the glass and stop pouring the water when the water touches the thumb.

Texture plays a pivotal role in the pleasure of consumption. Disparity in textures, such as something crispy in an otherwise smooth dish, may increase the appeal of eating it. One of the first things that the diner notices in dine-in-the-dark restaurants is that the food is normally served in bite-sized pieces and without bones). Even the soup bowl will have 'ears' so that one can drink the contents rather than having to navigate spoonfuls of hot liquid towards one's mouth without spilling them down. It is, however, not only how the food is served that differs when compared to a normally illuminated restaurant. Complex combinations of flavours are also notable by their absence. It turns out that diners often find it difficult to distinguish between flavours in the absence of any visual cues. No full menu is also offered; in fact, the only decision that the diner typically has to make in such a restaurant is whether to go for the meat, fish, or vegetarian option. Sometimes there may be a surprise option as well. Furthermore, the names of the dishes often do not describe the food or the way in which it has been prepared (Spence and Fiszman 250).

Dining in absolute darkness imparts a sensory experience that awakens the senses and enables one to completely rediscover their individual perception of taste and smell. This is in communion with blindfolded tasting, which is part of some culinary programmes as a standard part of a chef's training.

The idea here is that a blind folded trainee should learn to rely more on their noses and mouths and hence develop their discriminative abilities based on their other senses rather than always simply relying on vision. This allows one to try out new combinations of flavours without any preconceptions and, hopefully, build up a library of flavours that may come in handy later. According to psychologists, Dr Charles Spence and Dr Betina Piqueras-Fiszman, instead of "making the food and drink taste better...or even giving one the sense of how the blind experience food, it is the feeling of constant unexpectedness that makes the experience so interesting" to diners (266). In this regard, dining-in-the-dark shares something with the experience of diners at a typical molecular gastronomy restaurant.

Shifting the focus from the sense of sight is the crucial element in the dark dining experience, though the general public's response towards food plating and presentation has always been a matter of discussion and research in modern science. Studies prove that the reactions of people vary according to different aesthetic principles such as colour, composition, design, and the organisation of a plate. They found that participants responded favourably to plates with four different colours, three different components, some empty space, and an asymmetrical and casual design. This research is particularly important because it demonstrates how food presentation affects people's eating habits and can be used in the study of health and nutrition.

We live in the age of visual magic. Our vision often deceives us into believing things which are not exactly true. Many restaurants serve us cuisine in an ornate form, creating a magic veil which influence us from believing the food to be tasty, though some restaurants live up to the expectations. As a result, many tend to consider distasteful foods to be unique and palpable to the taste buds because of the grand image that they endorse.

Removing vision certainly does allow one to concentrate more on the taste and aroma of food and drink. It is important to note that humans with limited attention capacity, and vision tends to capitalise on the available neural resources. In fact, it has been estimated that more than half of the brain's processing resources are in some way involved in processing what we see. As a result, we often don't pay as much attention to the other senses as perhaps we should. Indeed, more often than not, it is what we see that ultimately determines what we perceive. This turns out to be true even when the other senses may be sending the brain a different message. This ubiquitous phenomenon is known among psychologists as "visual dominance."

Our hedonic expectations, our taste evaluations, and even our total food intake are all determined, at least in part, by whatever we happen to see. We therefore argue that removing such salient visual cues, which are normally available to us both prior to and during the consumption of food, is likely to diminish the overall dining experience. No matter whether we realise it or not, sensory expectation and anticipation constitute a good part of the pleasure of a meal (255). The combination of selective neurons of the orbitofrontal cortex may provide an explanation for why this occurs. Vision has a dedicated neural role in the perception of taste. Removing the visual input fundamentally changes how taste is perceived, increasing the relative contributions of other senses. While ambient sound surely plays a role in the dining experience by influencing the diner's mood or ability to attend to eating, it does not have a primary role in influencing taste perception because there are no combination neurons in the gustatory cortex (although there are sound inputs into the orbitofrontal cortex).

Visual dominance is vital to the international food industry as certain colours create a psychological superiority or attraction among the customers. The colour 'black' often contributes to culinary diversity and usually has a valuable place on the menu, especially by international standards. A *halibut*, which has black pepper, coffee, lemon, and black liquorice, served in a white monochromatic presentation, is an example in point. The white funeral meal, on the other hand, is "consisting entirely of white food" and is served in specially "designed white crockery." The purpose of these meals is to allow the diner to concentrate on all of the other sensory aspects of the food, including the flavour, scent, and—above all—the oral and tactile textures of the food. "It's certainly a real-life example in which limiting a meal's colour palette (in this case, 'removing' it completely) can be used to encourage a diner to discover more of the flavour of the food via their oral-somatosensory textures perceived through their hands", while none of us may realise just how important colour is to our perception of food (Spence and Fiszman 255-256).

In this post-modern world, people seldom spend time having conversations with strangers and making friends, so much so that there are thousands of individuals who suffer from shyness, social inhibitions, and insecurities. Such people often fall into depression and lead an unhappy life with no social connection to look forward to. Psychologists usually refer to the Emotional Liberation Method (EL Method) to solve it (Gaschler 1). It is a social experience where darkness frees inhibitions and fosters conviviality without preconceptions. Dark dining can act as a different EL method to rectify the same.

Darkness changes the way how we interact with people, including those seated next to us. One overvalues social cues and body language from others. When it comes to social consumption of food, the dine-in-the-dark experience challenges the diner's typical ideas of intimacy and enjoyment through selective sensory deprivation. The utter darkness affects how we interact with those around us. Not only the eating but also the conversation with one's neighbours may be experienced as different. In fact, guests of these restaurants are occasionally purposefully seated on long benches, putting them in close quarters with strangers. Consequently, there is often no place for intimate conversation; the talk is more likely to revolve around issues such as one's inability to find the tableware or what to do about a spilled glass of wine. This might also be a good way to help break the ice if one finds oneself on a blind date. The finest example of this can be witnessed in China, where the majority of people are believed to be shy.

According to Chen Long, the owner of the "Whale Inside Dark Restaurant" in Beijing, this format seems to be working where dining in the dark helps them lower their social inhibitions (Spence and Fiszman 251). The diners' being unable to see one another has been seen as a positive feature, removing social inhibitions. Thus, it is not only about heightening the sense of taste but also about lowering social nervousness.

The scientists are of the view that after the intake of food, the brain takes about twenty minutes to give the cue to the digestive system whether one's appetite is full or not. If the attention span is low, for instance while watching TV, scrolling one's mobile or having engaged in deep conversations, then the brain's focus will be lost and ultimately more snacks or calories will be consumed by the body, resulting in obesity and other troublesome diseases. Slowing down and savouring food can help an individual control his/her intake. So, what a gourmand needs is mindful eating, the state of being fully aware of the things happening in and around one's body while eating. It lays emphasis on noticing the colours, smells, flavours and textures of one's food rather than getting distracted by modern gadgets. In this regard, Mindful Eating is or has an immortal connection with Dark Dining. Both celebrate the same process of relishing the flavours and heightening the senses. By paying attention to what a person is putting into his/her mouth, he/she is more likely to make healthier food choices and enjoy it to the fullest.

In addition to the experience of undergoing a never-before-tried taste, people are also given an opportunity to become familiar with what a blind person undergoes daily in this world. It takes a lifetime for blind people to acclimatise to new situations and surroundings in addition to those that are common to everyone else. We usually show sympathy instead of admiring them for their strength, but this social experiment of dining is slowly changing the perspective. Dining is one aspect of daily life for the blind; other challenges include education, employment, mobility, family, etc. Their experiences and stories should be accounted for. The dark dining experience shows that where blindness affects the daily lives of the blind, difficulties can be overcome.

Interaction of clients with the waiters after the consumption of food is a nice way to start respecting their value. This evokes the waiter to shed his own inhibitions and insecurities as he starts to tell stories to the whole group of guests. They talk about their experiences at the restaurant and tell stories about the rest of their lives. Usually, blind people are often treated as less able than people who can see and are made to feel that their experiences are not as important as those of others. However, the restaurant's darkness completely alters this perception as everyone is blind. Here, blind people are the experts. Though most of these restaurants are not aimed at charity, some dedicate a part of their profits as aid to causes concerned with visual impairment. According to CNN, some of these restaurants are "Dine in the Dark" ("DID") in Bangkok and "O.Noir", Montreal. Others are more focused on providing jobs and training for such people (Hemmerich).

While the notion of dining-in-the-dark started out as a whole meal eaten in darkness, some chefs interested in highlighting the role of each of the diner's senses in the multisensory perception of flavour have taken to serving meals where each course emphasises a different sense. It is interesting to note here that what may have started out as dining in the dark is now expanding into other activities also enjoyed in the dark. For example, John Metcalfe's "A Darker Sunset," a contemporary musical performance, was delivered in total darkness at Kings Place in London in 2013. According to Metcalfe, the reason for this was to remove all 'unnecessary' stimulation (by switching the lights off) and allow the audience to focus squarely on the music, while at the same time exploring the relationship between the performer and the audience.

The multisensory blindfolded dinners organised in New York by artist Dana Salisbury (owner of Dark Dining, a performance/catering company) can be seen to merge a number of these elements into a single event. "She combines blindfolded dining with dance, music, and other more theatrical elements". At some of her events, Salisbury also has her guests caress each other's hands (in the dark), asking them to "feel below the skin, below muscle and bone" (Spence and Fiszman 254).

Another of her intriguing offerings is the Hand-Fed Dark Dining Parties that she organises in diners' own homes, where the clients prepare their favourite menu and invite up to three friends to join them.

The influence of darkness in understanding one's senses to the full extent has given rise to another field which has never been talked about in detail, called Blind Cooking. Preparing a meal without vision is certainly much more of a challenge than eating without being able to see the food. This has become prominent after the entry of Christine Huyentran Ha, the first blind contestant on *Master Chef* and the winner of its third season in 2012. Her victory had opened new opportunities for similar personas. One instance is the show *Four Senses*, a cooking show focusing on the visually and hearing impaired. This was followed by another one called *Cooking without Looking* to raise awareness about the challenges faced by blind people who cook.

"When you see disability as a difference but not as a problem, then it brings you to very interesting concepts and ideas," says Edouard de Broglie, the founder of *Dans Le Noir?*, London and Paris (LeTrent).

This is true as the novel experience of dining in the dark makes us empathise with and respect a blind person whenever we meet one, which will make a big difference not only to us but also to the entire society. It also universalizes the concept of dependency. As a person with vision, there is an innate sense of superiority that works within everybody. This superiority disappears into oblivion when customers enter the dark restaurants, as they now have to confront a lot of difficulties: feeling afraid of the new, strange situation; dropping their forks or knives; being unable to find their own mouths etc. In other words, they have no option but to depend on their blind waiter for everything. These difficulties are a chance to learn from human experience where those with visual impairments become our eyes and guides for a short time in an intriguing, sensual world. Another reason that has been put forward to explain why people want to try this experience is the suggestion that it can give the diner a feeling of how the blind experience food.

Furthermore, we could say that when finding oneself in utter darkness at these types of restaurants, one very likely feels, more than ever, at the mercy of the chef/owner of the restaurant. Indeed, diners sometimes specifically mention their feelings of vulnerability. The diner really has to put their trust in the hands of the chef and serving staff. Every meal, embedded as it is in ritual, has a host who has a major influence on the diner's overall experience. The nature of the interaction is also related to the trust that builds up between the host and his or her guests. It can be argued that this feeling of trust is an essential element of the experience of dining in the dark. To conclude, through dark dining it can be identified that eating is not just a physical process, but an emotional one too. It makes you more aware of your emotions around food — fear, excitement, nostalgia. It serves as a reminder to appreciate life's small, sometimes disregarded pleasures. This understanding may make meals more meaningful and intimate in daily life.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR CULTURAL TRENDS AND MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

Social media has evolved from a communication tool into a powerful agent of cultural transformation. This paper critically analyses how platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok influence and accelerate cultural trends, drive social movements, and redefine norms. By enabling rapid information sharing and global connectivity, social media fosters the emergence of online subcultures, viral phenomena, and grassroots activism. Through case studies, the paper examines how social media amplifies marginalised voices, encourages participatory culture, and facilitates digital activism. However, it also interrogates the negative consequences, such as the spread of misinformation, performative activism, and cultural appropriation. The research highlights the dual nature of social media, as both a democratising force and a contributor to cultural homogenisation and echo chambers. Ultimately, this paper argues that social media is not merely a mirror of societal change but an active engine shaping collective identity, public discourse, and the evolution of cultural values.

Keywords: Social media, cultural change, digital activism, online subcultures, misinformation, identity formation.

Introduction

Social media has emerged as a dominant force in reshaping cultural landscapes, no longer functioning solely as a communication tool but as a primary driver of artistic creation, transformation, and mobilisation. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat have disrupted traditional hierarchies of influence, allowing decentralised, user-driven content to define trends, movements, and public discourse. These platforms facilitate rapid information flows and enable the construction of digital communities centred around shared ideologies, identities, and aesthetics.

This paper critically investigates the role of social media in initiating and sustaining cultural trends and social movements. Rather than focusing purely on content, the analysis considers structural mechanisms such as algorithms, virality, and participatory culture that shape which narratives rise to prominence. Key themes explored include hashtag activism, the formation of online subcultures, and the evolution of digital advocacy.

The study employs a qualitative methodology combining case study analysis and thematic content analysis to examine these dynamics. Selected case studies include prominent social media movements (e.g., #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter), viral trends, and grassroots campaigns. Digital artefacts such as tweets, posts, videos, and comment threads are analysed to understand engagement patterns, narrative construction, and cultural impact. Secondary data from scholarly articles and media reports supplements the primary digital sources to provide contextual depth.

By focusing on how social media platforms amplify certain cultural expressions while silencing others, this paper aims to unpack the complex relationship between technology, culture, and power. It argues that social media not only reflects societal values but actively produces and shapes them, serving as both a democratising force and a site of contestation.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in media theory and cultural studies, aiming to critically examine how social media platforms contribute to the formation, dissemination, and transformation of cultural trends and social movements. Rather than treating social media as a neutral communication tool, this study views it as a dynamic cultural infrastructure that actively shapes public discourse and collective behaviour. The analysis is informed by two key theoretical perspectives: *Marshall McLuhan's* concept of media as extensions of human faculties and *Henry Jenkins'* framework of participatory culture. These frameworks offer complementary insights into the technological, social, and cultural implications of digital media in contemporary society.

Marshall McLuhan: Medium as Message and Extension

"Electric circuitry speeds up the mind. It enables us to perceive, think, and act simultaneously on a global scale." (*The Medium is the Massage* 63)

Marshall McLuhan's notion that "the medium is the message" underscores the transformative power of media technologies, emphasising that the medium itself—its form, structure, and affordances—alters human perception and societal organisation. According to *McLuhan,* media act as extensions of human senses and cognition, fundamentally changing the way we relate to information and to each other. In this context, social media platforms are not just carriers of content; they are technological environments that influence attention spans, interaction styles, and cognitive habits.

For instance, Twitter's 280-character limit encourages brevity, simplification, and immediacy, reshaping how political arguments or cultural debates are framed and consumed. Similarly, Instagram's visual emphasis fosters image-based engagement, influencing aesthetic trends and identity performance. TikTok's algorithm-driven content feed dictates what becomes culturally visible and what remains marginalised. These platform-specific logics dictate not only what users consume but also how they behave, perceive, and produce meaning.

McLuhan's perspective, the constant presence of social media in daily life reveals a societal dependence on these platforms to extend communication, memory, and community. However, this extension comes at the cost of transforming the pace and structure of human interaction. The shortening of attention spans, the rise of sensational content, and the preference for visual storytelling are not merely trends— they are manifestations of how the medium redefines the message and alters cultural consciousness.

Henry Jenkins: Participatory Culture and Cultural Convergence

"Fans make culture by rewriting and reinterpreting existing media texts, generating new meanings, identities, and desires." (*Textual Poachers* 22)

While McLuhan's theory offers a technological and structural lens, Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture brings attention to the social dynamics that govern user behaviour in digital environments. Jenkins argues that the digital era has shifted the role of audiences from passive consumers to active participants in media production. Users now generate content, remix existing materials, and collaborate across networks, effectively transforming the cultural landscape.

Social media is the most visible manifestation of this shift. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and climate justice activism exemplify how individuals leverage participatory platforms to mobilise collective identities and advocate for social change. These movements often originate at the grassroots level, gaining momentum through hashtags, viral videos, and shared narratives. Jenkins' framework helps unpack how these acts of cultural participation become powerful forces of influence, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and reconfiguring the public sphere.

However, Jenkins also recognises the double-edged nature of participatory culture. While it democratises expression and challenges hierarchical structures, it also introduces vulnerabilities. The same tools used for empowerment can facilitate misinformation, cancel culture, and performative activism. Moreover, participation is often uneven, reflecting pre-existing inequalities in access, digital literacy, and platform visibility. Cultural participation, therefore, is not inherently liberating—it is shaped by social, economic, and algorithmic forces that can amplify or silence voices.

Synthesising McLuhan and Jenkins: Social Media as a Cultural Force

Integrating *McLuhan's* and *Jenkins'* perspectives allows for a comprehensive understanding of social media as both a technological medium and a cultural system. McLuhan draws attention to the material and sensory impact of the platform itself, while Jenkins emphasises the participatory and communal aspects of digital culture. Together, these frameworks reveal the complex feedback loop between platform design and cultural behaviour—where technological affordances shape participation, and participation, in turn, reshapes technology and meaning.

This synthesis is particularly useful in analysing how social media produces cultural trends and supports social movements. Consider the case of TikTok challenges that originate in small subcultures but become global phenomena. While these trends may appear organic, their visibility is often orchestrated by platform algorithms that prioritise engagement, novelty, or profitability. Here, McLuhan's idea of media conditioning perception merges with Jenkins' theory of collaborative content creation, producing a nuanced picture of how culture evolves in digital spaces.

Similarly, in the political realm, hashtag movements like #MeToo or #FridaysForFuture exemplify participatory culture amplified by digital infrastructure. Yet, the spread of these movements is contingent upon platform mechanics—retweets, shares, comments, and likes—as much as on their underlying message. Social media serves as both the stage and the scriptwriter, shaping not only the content of activism but also its aesthetic, emotional, and temporal dimensions.

Importantly, these platforms commodify participation, turning user interactions into data and attention into profit. While Jenkins' participatory culture celebrates agency and collaboration, McLuhan's insights caution us about the structural effects of media technologies that commercialise culture and shape user behaviour in predictable, profit-driven ways. This commercial logic challenges the ideal of democratic participation, as those with more resources—followers, influence, access—often dominate visibility and discourse.

Cultural Power, Identity, and Representation

The convergence of cultural studies and media theory also reveals how social media transforms the politics of identity and representation. Individuals now craft their digital personas, curate their lifestyles, and perform their values in highly visible ways. This identity construction is influenced by platform norms—Instagram aesthetics, TikTok trends, or Twitter discourse—and by peer validation mechanisms such as likes, shares, and follower counts.

McLuhan's theory reminds us that such behaviours are not merely individual choices but responses to the affordances of the medium itself. The platform structures the kind of self-expression that becomes normative. Jenkins, meanwhile, draws attention to the communal dynamics of identity—how shared cultural references, participatory rituals, and fandoms coalesce into online communities.

Together, these frameworks help us critically evaluate how digital representation can be both empowering and limiting. While social media provides spaces for marginalised identities to gain visibility and connect across boundaries, it also reinforces stereotypes, pressures users into performative authenticity, and reduces complex identities into marketable categories. Culture in the age of social media is increasingly mediated by algorithms, attention economies, and aesthetic codes.

Implications for Cultural Transformation

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of social media is crucial for analysing its cultural consequences. McLuhan helps us see that media technologies are not neutral—they reshape how humans experience and construct reality. Jenkins pushes us to consider how users engage with those technologies to co-create meaning. Together, they reveal social media as both a **tool of empowerment** and a **site of power negotiation**.

This research argues that social media's role in shaping modern culture is neither entirely positive nor wholly negative. It democratises participation while introducing new forms of control; it amplifies diverse voices while privileging algorithm-friendly content; it fosters community while encouraging commodification. Recognising these contradictions is essential for understanding how culture is negotiated in digital spaces.

Far from being passive transmitters of culture, social media platforms actively **produce, organise, and monetise** cultural expression. Their impact must be understood not just through individual behaviours or trending content but through the theoretical lenses that reveal the deeper patterns of media influence and cultural change. McLuhan and Jenkins, when applied together, offer a critical foundation for such analysis.

Impact of Social Media on Cultural Trends

Social media has transformed the mechanisms through which cultural trends emerge, evolve, and circulate. The platform-driven structure of digital media not only democratises cultural production but also alters the speed and scale of trend dissemination. Applying McLuhan's theory of media as extensions of human faculties and Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, this section critically analyses the ways in which social media shapes key cultural domains.

1. Beauty and Fashion Trends

"The 'clean girl' aesthetic, promoted on TikTok by influencers with slicked-back hair and dewy skin, is seen by millions as the new face of minimalist beauty" (*The Guardian*).

The fashion and beauty industries have undergone significant restructuring in the digital age, with social media platforms acting as the new arbiters of style. Unlike traditional fashion media—run by elite editors, magazines, and fashion houses—platforms like TikTok and Instagram now facilitate grassroots aesthetic movements.

The emergence of the "clean girl looks", characterised by sleek hairstyles, minimalist makeup, and understated fashion, illustrates how viral trends arise from user-generated content rather than institutional endorsement. McLuhan's insight into media shaping perception becomes evident here: the visual, algorithm-driven nature of platforms like TikTok encourages certain aesthetic standards. At the same time, Jenkins' participatory culture helps explain how millions engage with, recreate, and personalise these looks, contributing to trend proliferation and commercial response.

2. Music Industry Disruptions

"Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams' returned to the Billboard charts after a TikTok video featuring the song racked up millions of views—underscoring how social media now decides the fate of music old and new" (*The New York Times*).

Social media has also disrupted traditional music industry gatekeeping. Previously, radio stations, record labels, and critics mediated an artist's rise. Today, virality on TikTok or Instagram Reels can propel unknown musicians into mainstream consciousness.

The resurgence of Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" after a viral video exemplifies how older content gains renewed cultural relevance through social sharing. This phenomenon highlights McLuhan's argument that the medium changes the nature of the message: a 1977 song recontextualised in a modern meme environment conveys a completely new cultural meaning. Platforms are not neutral—they actively shape which musical narratives gain traction.

3. Evolution of Language and Digital Expression

"From memes to emojis, social media platforms are reshaping how we express humor, sarcasm, and even grief, especially among younger generations" (*BBC Culture*).

Language has always been central to culture, and social media accelerates its evolution. Online platforms have become breeding grounds for slang, acronyms, memes, and other symbolic forms that transcend geographic and linguistic barriers.

GIFs, emojis, and short-form text illustrate McLuhan's theory of sensory extension—where visual symbols supplement or replace traditional language structures. Moreover, Jenkins' participatory culture is visible in how these linguistic elements are co-created, adapted, and normalised by users. Digital language has become both expressive and performative, contributing to identity construction and social belonging in virtual communities.

4. Political and Social Movements

"The Black Lives Matter movement exploded globally, in large part due to social media, which provided tools for organizing protests, spreading awareness, and holding institutions accountable" (*The Washington Post*).

Social media plays a dual role in activism: it facilitates rapid information dissemination and acts as a mobilising infrastructure. Movements such as Black Lives Matter have leveraged platforms like Twitter and Instagram to build global awareness, coordinate protests, and educate audiences.

Hashtag activism—such as #BLM or #StopAsianHate—demonstrates the cultural power of digital participation. Jenkins' theory illuminates the collective authorship and narrative-building that characterise these movements. Yet McLuhan's perspective reminds us that the platform's structure—the algorithmic sorting of content and the visual-emotional framing of posts—conditions the types of activism that gain visibility. Thus, while social media enhances participatory democracy, it also mediates and potentially distorts political expression.

5. Food and Lifestyle Cultures

"Dalgona coffee videos spread across TikTok and Instagram, turning a simple whipped drink into a visual ritual of pandemic life" (*The New York Times*).

Food culture has been significantly impacted by the visual and performative aspects of social media. Viral food trends—like Dalgona (whipped) coffee during the COVID-19 lockdown—highlight how domestic rituals gain global popularity through video sharing.

These trends are shaped by the platform's visual and algorithmic preferences. McLuhan's media theory explains how the image-centric nature of Instagram and TikTok privileges visually appealing content, turning food into an aesthetic and experiential product. At the same time, Jenkins' framework contextualises user participation—from replication of recipes to innovation and remixing—as a form of cultural co-creation. Social media thus transforms consumption into a communal, performative, and trend-based activity.

Movements on Social Media Platforms

1. Hashtag Activism

Hashtag activism is one of the most prominent forms of online mobilisation. Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter (BLM), #MeToo, and #FridaysForFuture have gained global prominence through social media, showing how digital platforms can empower individuals to challenge entrenched social norms.

• **#BlackLivesMatter** (BLM) became a rallying cry after the murder of George Floyd, galvanising protests across the globe. Through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, activists shared videos, coordinated actions, and built a worldwide network of solidarity. McLuhan's theory of media as extensions of human faculties highlights how BLM not only relies on digital tools to spread its message but also fundamentally changes the ways in which individuals perceive race, justice, and public action. The immediacy of digital media allows these issues to move from the margins to the mainstream.

• Similarly, **#MeToo** provided a platform for survivors of sexual assault to share their stories, holding powerful figures accountable. The viral nature of the hashtag exemplifies Jenkins' participatory culture, where users actively co-create narratives and form collective identities, facilitating both personal empowerment and societal change. The participatory aspect also points to a democratic restructuring of discourse—where once silenced voices can now demand attention and action.

• **#FridaysForFuture**, started by Greta Thunberg, illustrates how social media can amplify global causes. The hashtag became a global movement for climate change, with millions joining protests across countries. Social media enables a high level of **global convergence**, as Jenkins suggests, where local concerns (e.g., local environmental issues) can quickly become part of a global movement due to the participatory nature of digital platforms.

2. Organizing Protests

Social media's role in organising protests has been pivotal in numerous instances, especially in regions where traditional media are controlled or censored. During the **Arab Spring** (2010–2012), social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became essential tools for organising protests, rallying support, and communicating with international audiences. These platforms acted as spaces for collective action, as McLuhan's theory would suggest, allowing participants to **extend their reach** and **amplify their voices** far beyond the confines of state-controlled media. The Arab Spring demonstrated that social media could **redefine power dynamics** and disrupt authoritarian control by providing alternative narratives and avenues for mobilisation.

A more recent example is the **Hong Kong Protests** (2019–2020), where social media platforms helped activists organise and share information while circumventing government surveillance. Encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal allowed for secure, decentralised communication, ensuring that protestors could continue their resistance while evading state censorship. This reflects McLuhan's insight into the adaptability of media and technology in response to changing socio-political conditions, as activists transformed the medium to enhance their agency and security.

3. Giving Voice to the Marginalized

Social media has also provided a critical platform for marginalised groups to share their stories and advocate for justice. Movements like **NoDAPL** (Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline) have drawn international attention to Indigenous land rights. Through the use of hashtags, images, and videos, protestors exposed environmental degradation and the violation of Indigenous sovereignty, creating global solidarity through digital activism.

The role of social media in amplifying marginalised voices is also evident in the **Iranian Women's Protests** (2022), where activists used platforms like Twitter and Instagram to bypass censorship and inform the world about human rights violations. Even in the face of governmental suppression, social media proved to be a vital tool for disseminating real-time information and raising awareness of abuses that would otherwise remain hidden. Jenkins' theory of participatory culture suggests that these movements were co-created by a diverse set of voices, many of whom previously lacked access to mainstream media outlets. This democratisation of voice through social media illustrates the disruptive potential of digital platforms in shaping global public opinion.

4. Humanitarian Aid and Fundraising

Social media platforms have also revolutionized humanitarian aid and fundraising efforts. Campaigns like **COVID-19 relief** efforts and **Ukrainian and Palestinian humanitarian support** highlight the way digital platforms facilitate rapid mobilization for crisis response.

Social media advertisements, crowdfunding platforms, and viral posts have become integral in organizing support for affected communities, demonstrating how online spaces can transcend geographical boundaries to facilitate real-world aid.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media not only provided critical health information but also acted as a conduit for raising funds for affected individuals and communities. Campaigns on platforms like GoFundMe, Facebook, and Instagram allowed for the rapid collection of financial resources, showcasing social media's role in community-building and financial mobilization.

Similarly, in the context of **Ukrainian and Palestinian support**, social media campaigns, such as viral posts and live broadcasts, have drawn international attention to humanitarian crises, urging governments and organizations to provide assistance. Jenkins' theory of participatory culture is particularly relevant here, as social media enables individuals worldwide to contribute to collective efforts, whether by sharing information, donating funds, or raising awareness.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite the advantages of social media in promoting social movements, challenges such as **algorithmic bias**, **misinformation**, and **cancel culture** remain significant. Algorithms often prioritise sensational content, creating **echo chambers** that polarise discussions. Misinformation can distort activism's message, damaging credibility. **Cancel culture**, while holding individuals accountable, risks unfairly punishing without due process. Social media platforms bear moral responsibility in moderating content, balancing **free speech** with protection from harm, and fostering fair discourse. Their role in curating content is crucial for maintaining the integrity of social movements, ensuring they remain constructive and inclusive.

Conclusion

Social media has proven to be a transformative force in shaping cultural trends and social movements, acting as a catalyst for change in modern society. By amplifying voices, fostering global connections, and accelerating the spread of ideas, platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram have revolutionised how activism and cultural production occur. However, the challenges posed by **algorithmic bias**, **misinformation**, and **cancel culture** must be critically addressed. As technology continues to evolve, so will its influence on societal structures.

Future research should focus on the **long-term implications** of social media on **cultural identity**, **political engagement**, and the **ethical responsibilities** of platforms in fostering informed, inclusive, and constructive dialogue.

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THE PRIMACY OF POSTHUMAN ERA: A STUDY OF TRANSHUMAN AUTHORITY IN *THE BOYS*

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Abstract

Our world is controlled by a minority of dominant people with power, and the only thing a powerful man desires is more power. The threat posed by this power struggle and unending desire for dominance in a transhuman world, is greater than we think. Even though transhumans are products of human technology they contain potency beyond the capabilities of normal humans. Being more powerful than humans, transhumans will strive for authority over humans. For that reason, in a transhuman world, human supremacy will not last for long and will be replaced by transhuman authority. Transhumanism is a philosophical and intellectual movement that advocates the use of technology to enhance human capabilities and transcend the limitations of the human condition. It encompasses a wide range of ideas, from improving physical and cognitive abilities to extending human lifespan or even exploring the possibility of uploading human consciousness into digital systems. The notion of transhuman authority in the posthuman era raises questions about governance, decision-making, and power structures in a society where humans and technology might be deeply integrated. It involves considering how authority is distributed and who has control over transformative technologies and their applications. Views on transhuman authority vary. Some argue that decision-making power should be decentralized and distributed among individuals, ensuring personal autonomy and freedom to shape one's own enhancement journey. Others propose that regulatory bodies or expert panels should oversee the development and deployment of transformative technologies to ensure responsible and ethical use. Ethical considerations are also crucial in discussions around transhuman authority. It is important to address potential inequalities that may arise due to differential access to enhancement technologies, ensuring that these technologies are available to all, irrespective of socioeconomic factors. Additionally, careful thought must be given to the potential consequences and risks associated with certain enhancements, such as unintended side effects or unforeseen societal impacts. The American Television Series *The Boys* portrays such negative sides of transhuman advancements in the posthuman era.

The Series *The Boys* subverts the stereotypical notion of super humans being heroes. While the series primarily focuses on the dark and satirical take on superheroes, it does touch upon certain themes related to transhumanism. In *The Boys,* the concept of transhumanism is explored through the existence of "supes" (superheroes) who possess superhuman abilities. These abilities are often the result of genetic modification or compound V, a mysterious substance that grants superpowers. The show raises questions about the ethical implications of transhumanism, as the powers of these superheroes often lead to abuse of authority, corruption, and a lack of accountability. The series portrays the negative aspects of unchecked transhumanism, highlighting the dangers of granting immense power to individuals without proper oversight. *The Boys* presents a critique of the superhero genre and explores the consequences of transhuman abilities in a world where corporations profit from them. This paper delves into themes of transhuman authority, power, corruption, and the dark side of human nature, using transhumanism as a backdrop for these narratives.

Key Words: Transhumanism, Posthumanism, Transhuman Authority, Power, Paradoxical Protagonist, Superheroes**.**

The age-old comic superheroes are the modern-day embodiment of transhumans. Steve Fuller in his book *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era,* has discussed the connection between superheroes and transhumans. He labels superheroes like Superman and Batman as transhumans. He claims that "Superman and Batman are reasonably seen as 'transhumanists', who have decisively transcended humanity's ape-like origins, albeit in interestingly different senses. Superman is 'always already' genetically modified by virtue of his extraterrestrial ancestry, a fact that he disguises in human company" (21). This inherent association between transhumanism and superheroes remains relatively unexplored, offering valuable insights into the potential duality of transhuman authority within a posthuman world. The Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom, in his article *Transhumanist Values,* defines transhumanism as an "interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology. Attention is given to both present technologies, like genetic engineering and information technology, and anticipated future ones, such as molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence" (3). Hence, human beings with superhuman abilities who have enhanced cognitive and sensory capacities are usually termed as transhumans.

They also possess the ability to slow down or eliminate the whole concept of ageing. Consequently, the terms superheroes and transhumans are intrinsically interconnected.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not all superheroes can be categorically labelled as transhumans, as the latter term specifically encompasses genetically and technologically modified human entities. Upon delving into the realm of comics, it becomes evident that the majority of superheroes are portrayed not as transhumans, but rather as ethereal beings.

Superheroes have captured the imaginations of people across the globe for decades, showcasing the incredible power and abilities that ordinary humans can only dream of. From Superman's invincibility and flight to Spider-Man's incredible agility and web-slinging skills, superheroes embody the human desire to transcend our physical and mental limitations. These superhuman abilities are often the result of origin stories that involve exposure to unusual elements, scientific experiments, or advanced technologies. In this sense, superheroes serve as a metaphor for the potential of human enhancement, inspiring us to imagine what could be achieved if we could push the boundaries of our capabilities. The concept of transhumanism, advocates the utilisation of advanced technologies to augment human physical and cognitive capabilities. Rooted in the belief that humanity can actively steer its own evolution, transhumanism seeks to overcome inherent limitations and attain elevated levels of well-being. Biomedical interventions, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence are among the technologies envisaged to facilitate these enhancements, albeit with a strong emphasis on ethical considerations to ensure responsible and equitable implementation. The movement's far-reaching vision extends beyond mere human improvement, aspiring to a posthuman era where individuals transcend their biological constraints, potentially ushering in a new phase of existence.

The overlap between superheroes and transhumanism lies in their shared exploration of human potential. Superheroes often act as transhuman archetypes, embodying the ideals of human enhancement taken to an extreme. Through their extraordinary abilities, superheroes encourage us to reflect on what it means to be human and how we might evolve in the future. Moreover, the stories of superheroes often delve into the ethical and moral implications of possessing such powers. Likewise, transhumanism raises similar ethical questions about the responsible use of technology and the potential consequences of enhancing ourselves beyond our current capabilities. The parallel nature of these dilemmas highlights the importance of considering the ethical implications of any advancements in human enhancement. Superheroes and transhumanism both tap into our inherent desire for progress and self-improvement. They motivate us to dream of a better future and encourage us to strive for greatness, reminding us that the human journey is a constant quest for growth and understanding. While superheroes remain fictional characters, they play a crucial role in stimulating our imagination and pushing the boundaries of what we believe is possible. Transhumanism, on the other hand, represents a real-world movement that continues to gain traction as technology progresses. Superhero movies as well as Television series are successful in combining and portraying this fictional reality of transhumanism and superheroes in a posthuman era.

In the world of comics, Superheroes are heroic figures who save, support, help, fight, and avenge. They are depicted as saviours who protect the Earth or human beings from Supervillains or an impending apocalypse. The traditional superhero characters of DC and Marvel depict superheroes falling under the aforementioned category. They would be noble, selfless, and possess absolute chivalric qualities. The creators intend to project positive qualities of their characters, and popular culture has embarked on such a notion of super heroic culture. While analysing the popular superhero movies of both DC and Marvel, we come across a vast variety of superheroes, including Superman, Ironman, Captain America, Black Panther, etc., who fight and sacrifice their lives to save the world. In the postmodern world, these so-called superheroes are examples of transhumans and posthumans. They are the true positive embodiments of technological advancements. These characters symbolically represent humans' ability to control the cycle of nature because most of these superheroes were once ordinary human beings who unexpectedly acquired powers beyond their imagination. Every human being is a complex mixture of the binary opposites of good and evil, regardless of the power they acquire. However, the superhero movies always focus on the positive side and glorify the superheroes, leaving out the dark and evil sides of every superhero character. They rarely portray the emotional side of the so-called superheroes; instead, the movies focus on action and spectacle to entertain the audience. Another important factor is that, in order to compensate for this complete dereliction of the negative side of the heroic characters, they bring into the story purely evil characters and label them as villains. Rather than combining these traits, they are splitting them, which is similar to separating the consciousness of the human mind. In Freudian terms, the Id is separated, isolated, and transformed into villainous characters, whereas the superheroes are driven by ego and superego, which allows them to act morally. Ordinary beings, when bestowed with unnatural powers, gain extra physical and mental abilities, but they are never devoid of their negative traits, and the movies fail to showcase this aspect. Human beings are vulnerable and act according to emotions, whereas the actions of super heroes are driven by morality.

The American television series *The Boys,* which premiered in 2019, subverts this entire concept of conventionally upstanding super-heroic traits.

The Boys is a highly acclaimed television series that premiered exclusively on Amazon Prime Video. The show is an adaptation of the comic book series of the same name, originally created by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson. Developed by Eric Kripke, *The Boys* has garnered widespread popularity and critical recognition since its release. Produced by Amazon Studios, Sony Pictures Television Studios, and Kripke Enterprises, the executive production team includes notable names such as Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, and Eric Kripke himself. Rogen and Goldberg, known for their involvement in successful film and television projects, played a pivotal role in the development of the show, having been fans of the original comic book series. The success of theseries has resulted in its renewal for multiple seasons. The third season, which premiered on July 3, 2022, further expanded the intricate narrative and character development.

The ensemble cast of *The Boys* features a roster of talented actors. Karl Urban takes on the role of Billy Butcher, the leader of the boys' gang, while Jack Quaid portrays Hughie Campbell, the protagonist through whose perspective the audience experiences the world of the series. Anthony Starr delivers a captivating performance as Homelander, the formidable and manipulative leader of the Seven. Jessie Usher portrays A-Train, a lightning-fast speedster whose actions have far-reaching consequences. Chace Crawford brings depth to The Deep as a conflicted member of the Seven struggling with his place in the world. Erin Moriarty shines as Starlight, the newest addition to the Seven, whose journey of self-discovery and idealism captivates viewers. Additionally, Laz Alonso, Tomer Capon, and Karen Fukuhara deliver compelling performances as Mother's Milk, Frenchie, and Kimiko, respectively. The cast adeptly captures the complex and conflicted nature of their characters, contributing to the show's captivating storytelling. Through its skilled cast, engaging storytelling, and incisive social commentary, *The Boys* has solidified its position as a standout contribution to the realm of superhero television, prompting critical and audience acclaim alike.

This television series seamlessly blends various genres, incorporating elements of superhero fiction, dark comedy, and biting social satire. It presents a deconstructionist narrative within a posthuman world where the conventional ideals of heroism and virtue are subverted. Breaking away from the traditional code of superhero movies, the series delves into a cynical examination of the corrupt and morally compromised nature of these superhuman individuals. It has garnered critical acclaim for its unique blend of dark humour, compelling plotlines, and thought-provoking social commentary. It fearlessly confronts issues of power dynamics, celebrity culture, and the ethical complexities associated with the superhero genre. By challenging the traditional portrayal of superheroes as incorruptible and noble figures, the series prompts viewers to reconsider the often-idealised image of these iconic characters. It counterchecks the flaws in those extraordinary beings despite their superior power. The series presents a sombre reflection of the consequences of power and the blurred line between heroism and villainy. It also dismantles the popular notion and exhibits the negative attitudes of superheroes in the setting, thus demonstrating the destructible nature of transhumans and the threatening authority of posthumanism. The superheroes portrayed in *The Boys* are not ethereal beings but ordinary human beings transformed into superhumans or transhumans through gene modification by injecting a complex drug called Compound V. It proves how the concepts of heroism and superhumanism can be altered. *The Boys* portrays transhumans with the effect of compound V as beings with an incredible capacity to alter the existence of human beings. By satirically portraying the transhuman overtake of common mass and the untouchable power of transhuman authority, the series explores the idea that possessing extraordinary powers might not always lead to the most altruistic actions. What makes this series a success is that instead of focusing solely on heroic deeds, the narrative delves into the personal struggles, flaws, and temptations faced by the superhuman characters. It questions the inherent goodness or purity of superheroes and the consequences of wielding immense power without proper accountability. Themes like moral ambiguity, ethical dilemmas, and the corruption that power can bring take centre stage. The characters are grappling with their own desires and personal agendas and are tempted to misuse their abilities for personal gain or revenge. Hence, Kripke has been successful in presenting a more complex and realistic portrayal of superhumans, showcasing that even with extraordinary abilities, they can still be flawed and morally compromised individuals. Additionally, the series explores how the presence of superhumans impacts society as a whole. It could be questioned whether having such powerful beings is ultimately a blessing or a curse. Are they really protectors, or do they become threats themselves?

Within *The Boys,* a myriad of characters assumes the roles of superhumans, but they can be best described as antiheroes who are mock depictions of the celebrated mainstream superhero characters commonly found in the renowned DC and Marvel cinematic universes.

These satirically represented superhero characters serve as an example of Michael Grantham's concept of the paradoxical protagonist because these characters are "an amalgam of the primary concepts: the anti-hero and the transhuman." (Grantham, 4).

This complex, antiheroic transhuman controlling the masses and implementing their power and authority mirrors not the ideas of democracy but those of dictatorship. Thus, it reflects the alarming negative impacts of transhuman authority. As the primary leader of 'The Seven', a group of corporate-backed superheroes, Homelander embodies the archetype of the traditional patriotic hero, representing the quintessential symbol of American power and virtue. However, beneath his facade of righteousness, Homelander exemplifies the dark side of unchecked authority, exploring themes of manipulation, hubris, and the dangers of absolute power. This duality makes Homelander an embodiment of the Nietzschean concept of the Übermensch, showcasing the potential for extraordinary abilities to corrupt rather than uplift.

Homelander can be considered the hybrid version of Marvel's Captain America and DC's Superman. In the Superman series of movies by DC, the protagonist Clark Kent is portrayed as transcendental, attributing all the virtuous characteristics to him. Similarly, Marvel's Captain America, depicted as the American figure of protection and security, is ascribed as scrupulousness. In contrast, Homelander is rendered as an evil version of the aforementioned superheroes in this series. He possesses an impressive array of superhuman abilities that include the extraordinary capacity of heat vision, awe-inspiring super strength, unparalleled durability, the ability to soar through the skies with flight, exceptional super hearing, and a voice empowered by enhanced vocal cords. Also, remarkable is the deceleration of the ageing process, a phenomenon attributed to the potent effects of Compound V. By analysing Homelander's character, one can delve into broader themes of moral ambiguity, the fragility of heroism, and the erosion of ethical boundaries in the face of overwhelming authority.

Vought International, previously known as Vought American, stands as an American multi-billion-dollar superhero entertainment conglomerate of immense influence in the setting of the series. Renowned for its establishment of the Seven, the world's most prominent superhero team, the corporation also holds sway over the management and regulation of licenced Supes worldwide. However, beneath the veneer of grandeur lies a darker reality: the company's rampant corruption and sinister aspirations for global dominance. Founded by Frederick Vought, a former member of the Third Reich, the roots of the corporation harbour a troubling past that casts a long shadow over its present endeavours.

A-Train, a rogue transhuman character from the series and member of the Seven, serves as a poignant exemplar of the dark consequences stemming from the exploitation of technology's integration into the human body. A-Train serves as a darker and more satirical rendition of DC's beloved superhero, the Flash, who is traditionally depicted as a symbol of positivity and heroism. In this edgier adaptation, A-Train embodies the antithesis of the Flash's virtuous image. He has a troubling history of misusing Compound V, the engineered chemical substance, to maintain his status as the fastest man in the world. Tragically, his abuse of the superpower-enhancing compound led to a devastating incident where he accidentally ran through and killed Robin Ward ("The Name of the Game", 00:05:40 - 00:05:42). In a bid to protect their public image, Vought orchestrated a cover-up, asserting during a press conference that A-Train was heroically responding to a bank robbery at the time of the unfortunate event. This elaborate deception shielded the true circumstances surrounding the incident from the public eye ("The Name of the Game", 00:09:50 – 00:10:12). This particular scene serves to underscore the immense and costly ramifications of A-Train's actions. Firstly, it illuminates the unintended nature of his actions in relation to the tragic demise of Robin Ward. Instead of being a deliberate act, the unfortunate incident resulted from a mere lapse in concentration while utilising his superpower. Positioned as the series' opening scene, it effectively illustrates the trajectory and profound consequences of what initially appeared to be a seemingly trivial error made by a transhuman. Secondly, the subsequent cover-up of the murder offers a disconcerting portrayal of how both influential individuals and superheroes exploit their authority to manipulate reality. This observation magnifies the alarming reality of how even the most abhorrent crimes perpetrated by superheroes can be artfully transformed into seemingly virtuous acts within the purview of transhuman authority. As the scene unfolds, it becomes apparent that the far-reaching costs of A-Train's inadvertent actions extend beyond the loss of a single life, engendering a web of deceit and manipulation that deeply impacts both society and the perception of superheroes as a whole. The price paid for this transhuman's simple mistake is immeasurable, serving as a cautionary tale of the high and insurmountable costs that can result from one misstep within the realm of the posthuman world under transhuman authority.

The power disparities within the transhuman world pose a grave and ever-present threat, as exemplified by a harrowing incident where dominance is ruthlessly exercised over a minority. The Deep, an antagonistic figure and a member of the Seven, wields the power of aquatic telepathy.

Unfortunately, over the years, The Deep has engaged in a disturbing pattern of sexually harassing, humiliating, and assaulting women he encounters. This reprehensible behaviour stems from his desire to mitigate his own feelings of worthlessness, exacerbated by his tremendous body dysmorphic disorder caused by unique physical features, including his gills.

In one particular event, The Deep is chosen to host the debut of Starlight, the newest addition to the Seven. Initially appearing charming and supportive, his façade quickly crumbles when Starlight reveals her past admiration for him as a child. In a shocking display of abuse of power, The Deep proceeds to engage in a despicable act of public masturbation in front of Starlight, exploiting her vulnerability and revealing his true malevolence.

Manipulating Starlight's trust, The Deep shamelessly coerces her into performing oral sex on him, threatening her expulsion from the Seven if she refuses. This deeply distressing scene serves as a poignant commentary on the pervasive abuse of power, the vulnerability of new members in the transhuman world, and the moral decay within the ranks of the Seven. It sheds light on the toxic culture that thrives in this universe, as even the most powerful figures use their positions to perpetrate acts of appalling abuse ("The Name of the Game", 00:20:10 – 00:24:20).

Another formidable adversary character in the series is Stormfront, a narcissistic member of the Seven, wielding the ability to manipulate electricity. However, her powers are overshadowed by her malevolent agenda, as she secretly embraces and propagates Nazi ideology. As a closet Nazi, she cunningly uses her position within the Seven to further her white supremacist beliefs, relentlessly implementing transhuman authority over human beings. Displaying a chilling and disturbing level of hatred, she takes immense pleasure in executing those who do not align with her twisted racial beliefs. This horrifying reality becomes shockingly evident when she callously massacres an entire block of apartments occupied by black residents. The gruesome act serves as a haunting testament to the depths of her depravity and the dangerous implications of unfettered transhuman authority ("Over the Hill with the Swords of a Thousand Men," 00:49:13 – 00:52:12). This character's malicious machinations and violent actions expose the insidious influence of extremist ideologies within the world of transhuman beings, adding an unsettling layer of complexity to the series' narrative. The portrayal of this character stands as a stark reminder of the dark consequences that arise when superhuman powers intertwine with abhorrent ideologies.

Homelander serves as the embodiment of a transhuman dictatorship, wielding his superhuman powers to assert control and dominance over minorities. Upon discovering that the Mayor of Baltimore possessed incriminating knowledge about the highly classified Compound V, Homelander took drastic measures to ensure the secrecy of this sensitive information. To safeguard the clandestine nature of the chemical's existence, he resorted to a chilling act of violence, obliterating the mayor's private jet, tragically claiming both the mayor's life and that of his innocent son. The young boy's excitement at receiving an autographed poster from his idol, Homelander, was heartbreakingly cut short, as the devastating incident cast a grim shadow over the heroic image of the superpowered figure ("The Name of the Game", 00:57:00 – 00:58:00).

Queen Maeve, another transhuman character from the series and a member of the Seven, and Homelander converge on a towering high-rise, aware that a concealed sniper lurks within. The vigilant SWAT team, poised to neutralise the threat, takes a momentary pause upon the arrival of the formidable duo from the Seven. Homelander, ever the master of grand theatrics, showers praise upon the law officers, extolling them as true heroes. Once inside the building, Homelander confronts the sniper, swiftly bringing an end to the perilous situation by plunging his hand through the assailant's chest. To maintain a facade of self-defence, he discharges several rounds from the fallen sniper's weapon, intentionally targeting Maeve's armour, creating the illusion of an apparent attack on the duo. In this carefully orchestrated display, Homelander skilfully manipulates appearances to protect the image of the Seven, obscuring the sinister reality of the situation from public scrutiny ("Get Some", 00:24:10 – 00:27:00).

In the post-human setting of the series, a perilous threat looms large as unchecked power distribution and rampant corruption dominate those in positions of authority. The manipulation of mutated transhumans or the malevolent creations they unleash pose an additional danger to this world. As the narrative unfolds, the dark consequences of such unbridled influence and the sinister machinations surrounding these superpowered beings unfold, painting a stark picture of the potential dystopian future that lies ahead. The episode "The Female of the Species" in Season 1 serves as a compelling illustration of the aforementioned dangers. In this pivotal event, the consequences of unchecked power distribution and corruption are laid bare. Madelyn Stillwell, a prominent character in the series, assumes the role of a significant antagonist, serving as the secondary antagonist during Season 1. Within the hierarchy of Vought International, she holds a high-ranking executive position.

Due to her influential position, Stillwell maintains frequent and close interactions with The Seven, the premier superhero team owned and managed by Vought International.Amidst the gripping crisis of a hijacked Transatlantic flight from Paris to Chicago by terrorists, Stillwell cunningly seizes the opportunity to advance her agenda of integrating supes into the military.

Calculating that a successful rescue mission executed by Maeve and Homelander while the plane hovers over international waters would garner substantial public support, she hopes to sway any hesitant congressmen from voting against the inclusion of supes in military operations. In this pivotal moment, the high-stakes rescue not only becomes a matter of saving lives but also a strategic manoeuvre to push forward the integration of super-powered individuals into the realm of global security ("The Female of the Species," 00:16:50-00:18:20).

The portrayal of the dark and malevolent aspects of godly figures, as previously alluded to, finds apt depiction in the fourth episode of Season 1. Homelander and Maeve effortlessly infiltrate the hijacked plane, successfully neutralising the terrorists to the relief and applause of the grateful passengers. However, the situation takes a chilling turn as they confront the last remaining terrorist in the cockpit, holding the pilot at gunpoint and a lifeless co-pilot beside him. Before the heroes can intervene, the desperate terrorist shoots the co-pilot, prompting Homelander to respond with his lethal heat vision, inadvertently damaging the flight controls in the process. Maeve implores Homelander to find a way to save the aircraft, but he regretfully points out the limitation of his powers, as he requires a solid surface to support the weight of the plane. Realising the dire circumstances, Homelander agonisingly concludes that they can only abandon the passengers to their fate. Maeve, however, pleads with him to at least save a mother and her daughter. Despite the moral dilemma, Homelander fears the potential backlash of saving only a few passengers while leaving the rest to perish, as it could tarnish their status as revered heroes.

Finally, with no other recourse, Maeve embraces Homelander, and together, they leave the doomed plane, flying away from the tragic scene. From a distance, they witness the heart-wrenching sight of the aircraft plunging towards the unforgiving ocean, leaving them haunted by the weight of their decisions and the heavy cost of their superhero personas. This installment of the series reveals their sinister tendencies and morally questionable actions ("The Female of the Species", 00:27:11 – 00:32:40). In stark contrast to the virtuous and selfless depiction of Peter Parker, also known as Spider-Man, in the movie *Spider-Man 2* (2004) directed by Sam Raimi, the incident involving Homelander and Maeve in the hijacked plane shatters the notion of superheroes being entirely devoid of darkness. While Spider-Man exemplifies the epitome of heroism by saving an entire train full of people despite enduring immense physical toll, the portrayal of Homelander and Maeve showcases the complex and flawed nature of paradoxical protagonists capable of making morally challenging decisions. Hence, it becomes evident that transhumans are "imperfect individuals, displaying a number of flawed characteristics and susceptibility to vice, selfish desire, and violence" (Grantham, 6). This stark juxtaposition challenges the notion of superheroes as unblemished saviours, revealing the intricacies of their actions and the potential for shades of grey within their characters. The differing portrayals of Spider-Man and Homelander illustrate that even the most celebrated heroes may grapple with ethical dilemmas, underscoring the complexity of their roles as protectors of the greater good.

The extremes to which Homelander goes, to assert his authority over the common masses, can be witnessed later in the series. A startling and pivotal shift occur when Homelander covertly provides the potent Compound V to terrorists, seeking to showcase the perceived supremacy of the Seven and their transhuman abilities. The terrorists are transformed into superpowered beings, creating a dangerous divide between the newly formed supervillains known as 'supe terrorists' and the former members of the Seven. This schism exacerbates the vulnerability of ordinary civilians, as the transhuman authority overpowers and overwhelms them. The emergence of supe terrorists unleashes a wave of chaos and fear, leaving the world at the mercy of these newly empowered adversaries. The once revered Seven now face a moral crisis, grappling with the consequences of their actions and the havoc they inadvertently unleashed.

As the transhumans' influence escalates, a disturbing overtaking of power occurs, with the transhuman authority surpassing that of ordinary human beings. The heightened tension and dangerous implications push the world to the brink of transhuman supremacy, where ordinary civilians must confront the dire reality of a world overshadowed by superpowered beings. The gripping narrative highlights the profound impact of unchecked power and the complex ethical dilemmas posed by transhuman authority in a posthuman world by showcasing the dark side of superhero characters. Every innovation or discovery often begins with the noble intention of improving human well-being, but history has shown that unintended consequences can pose significant threats to humanity itself. A prime example lies in the concept of transhuman authority, which may emerge in the envisioned post-human era.

While the pursuit of enhanced capabilities aims to elevate human potential, concerns arise as this could potentially lead to a future where transhumans outnumber traditional humans. This shift in power dynamics raises ethical questions, as it may result in the unchecked dominance of transhumans over their non-enhanced counterparts, leaving the latter at a disadvantage in any potential conflict.

The parallel drawn to *The Boys* reminds us that unchecked transhuman authority won't bring us the peace and longevity we hope for in a posthuman world; instead, it will only bring chaos and fear. This exemplifies the misuse of power and underscores the pressing need to address the ethical challenges that arise when individuals with augmented abilities hold authority over those without such enhancements. It urges us to carefully consider the implications of such advancements and to develop ethical frameworks that ensure the equitable treatment and protection of all individuals, regardless of their enhanced status. Only by being mindful of the consequences of our actions can we strive to create a future that benefits all of humanity, promoting harmony and inclusivity rather than exacerbating divisions.

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THE HARMONY OF VISUALS AND MUSIC: A STUDY OF WONDERSIN SHANKAR'S TAMIL CINEMATIC SOUNDTRACKS

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Abstract

Tamil cinema, particularly in the works of director Shankar, is distinguished by its exceptional ability to integrate music and visuals, thereby creating a distinctive cinematic experience. This study investigates the harmonious relationship between visuals and music in Shankar's Tamil film songs. A prominent characteristic of his filmmaking is the utilization of wonders of the world—comprising historical, natural, and artificial elements—as settings for his song sequences. These stunning and exotic backdrops not only enhance the visual experience but also contribute significant depth to the narrative, effectively communicating themes of love, ambition, fantasy, glory, and magnificence. By featuring his songs in captivating locations, Shankar fosters a connection among diverse cultures and extends the global appeal of his films.

Through comprehensive analysis, this study elucidates how Shankar's innovative use of these wonders transforms his songs into powerful visual experiences that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. By investigating the lyrical themes, musical compositions, and visual storytelling techniques, this research aspires to elucidate the role of music in Shankar's films and assess how he employs music as a narrative device to enrich the overall cinematic experience.

Keywords: global wonders, exotic location, geographical boundaries, visual culture, narrative device

Introduction

Cinema, as a visual and auditory medium, possesses the ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers through the synergy of music, imagery, and storytelling. Indian cinema has long been recognized for its seamless integration of music into storytelling. The Tamil film industry, known as Kollywood, is one of the largest in Indian cinema, and these films tend to forcibly incorporate a song sequence. Tamil cinema has beautifully captured the magic of nature through its songs. Songs are an integral part of Indian popular cinema, and if the songs are a psychological backbone of the audiences, it is important to analyse the recent trend in Tamil cinema. Songs often function not only as expressions of emotions but also as vehicles for visual spectacle and artistic ingenuity.

Shankar Shanmugam is an Indian film director, producer, and screenwriter, primarily known for his work in Tamil cinema. He has also worked in Telugu and Hindi films. Shankar's films are known for addressing contemporary social issues and vigilante themes and incorporating state-of-the-art technology and visual effects (VFX) with magnificence. Throughout his career, he has won several awards, including one National Film Award, four Film fare Awards South, and six Tamil Nadu State Film Awards. Additionally, six of his films have won the National Film Award for Best Special Effects. Director Shankar, one of Tamil cinema's most visionary filmmakers, has redefined the art of song visualization through his grand imaginative storytelling and is known for his grand innovative cinematic techniques like breath-taking visuals, innovative use of technology, and socially relevant themes in Tamil cinema. His films frequently incorporate elements of wonder, using breath-taking locations, larger-than-life sets, glorification, magnificence, and imaginative narratives to enhance the visual and emotional appeal of songs. By examining his signature style, the role of spectacle in shaping audience perception and the evolution of song sequences is shown in Tamil cinema.

Shankar's unique approach combines fantasy and reality, setting new standards for visual storytelling. These examples show how Tamil filmmakers have skillfully used exotic international locations to improve the production value and visual appeal of their song sequences over time. Most of Shankar's films will include one song set in exotic locations. Here are a few Tamil songs that explore the themes of wonder and marvel. Several songs honour nature's beauty, architecture, and wonders such as rain, mountains, rivers, forests, and changing seasons. The song speaks metaphorically about discovering wonders in love and life, making direct references to the Seven Wonders of the World, comparing the heroine's beauty to them, and emphasizing historical wonders. Some songs celebrate human achievements by emphasizing the impact of technology and the glorification of our world, which is relevant to the song's themes.

The selected songs for our studies are as follows:

The songs "Poovukul Olinthirukkum" and "Kannodu Kanbathellam" are from the 1998 movie 'Jeans'. Both songs were composed by A.R. Rahman, and the lyrics were written by Vairamuthu. Aishwarya Rai and Prashanth play the lead roles in the songs.

The song "Poovukkul Olinthirukkum" appears to be set in a timeless, classical era, with Aishwarya Rai wearing clothes and hairstyles similar to those of the old aristocracy. The song's background images feature the Seven Historical Wonders of the World, which adds historical and cultural significance to the song. The Seven Queens and the "Royal Eighth Wonder of the World" symbolize Aishwarya Rai's beauty, grace, and royalty. Overall, "Poovukkul" is a visually stunning, musically soothing, and culturally rich song that celebrates Indian heritage and highlights Aishwarya Rai's beauty and talent. She wears two costumes for each site, except for the Empire State building. One of the two looks was inspired by the queens of their respective countries, while the other was futuristic. The queen-inspired costumes in the song were as follows: at the Great Wall of China, inspired by Zhao Feiyan; at the Eiffel Tower, inspired by Marie Antoinette; at the Taj Mahal, inspired by Mumtaz Mahal; at the Pyramids of Giza, inspired by Cleopatra; at the Colossus, inspired by Isabella II; and at the Leaning Tower of Pisa, inspired by Queen Margherita.

The song's poetic lyrics explore themes of love and wonder. The song's title, "Poovukkul Olinthirukkum," literally means "the beauty that resides in flowers." The lyrics contrast nature's beauty with that of the beloved. The protagonist of the song is struck by the world's beauty, from flowers to music. He says that the beauty of the beloved surpasses all other wonders. The song uses vivid imagery and metaphors to describe the beauty of love. The song's protagonist is overwhelmed by the beauty of the beloved and describes it as a wonder that cannot be expressed in words. The song's first stanza lines, "Poovukkul olindirukkum kani kootamadisayam," translate to "the fruits that are hidden inside a flower are a wonder." The next lines, "vannathu poochu udanbil ooviyangal adisayam," translate to "the patterns on a butterfly's body are a wonder." The following lines, "thunai sellum kaatru melisaiyaadhal adisayam" and "gurunaadhar illaadha kuyilpaattu adisayam," translate to "the sound of wind passing through a hole is a wonder" and "the song of a cuckoo, without a teacher, is a wonder," respectively.

Some additional lines from the song mention wonders, including love that has existed before the ages of stones, sands, and seas; the love that blooms in everyone's heart at the ripe age of sixteen; the fragrance of flowers on scentless branches; a girl's fingers, her nails like a crown; and the moving curves of a female body. Overall, the song is fully filled with wonder in every aspect. The chorus of the song, "Athisayamae asanthupogum nee yenthanathisayam," translates to "You are a wonder that cannot be described, and you are my wonder." The lyrics of the song are a poetic expression of the beauty of love and the wonder of being in love. The lyrics of the song compare Aishwarya Rai to a wonder of the world, citing that she is the "eighth wonder of the world." The song's use of vivid imagery and metaphors contributes to its beauty and establishes it as a timeless classic.

In the song "Kannodu Kanbathellam," an interesting element is presented related to AI and robotics. Prashanth's characters, Visu and Ramu, have to marry twins, but Aishwarya Rai's characters are not twins, so she has a computer-animated holographic twin. The character Mano creates the AI interface to create another copy of Aishwarya Rai, and he operates the AI interface that allows Vaisu to dance in parallel with the real Aishwarya Rai. Thus, it is a song featuring the Miss World herself and her CGI clone. Vairamuthu's lyrics in "Kannodu Kanbathellam" carry a philosophical essence. The song explores themes of illusion versus reality, love, and fate. This line reflects the song's central theme, which is perception versus truth. The protagonist expresses her emotional turmoil, questioning whether what she feels is real or just an illusion created by circumstances. The line "Thennattu veedu kaatrum kaathal kaatrum onru aanalum veru" translates to "The southern wind and the breeze of love may seem alike, but they are different." This poetic comparison suggests that just as nature's breeze and love's emotions may seem similar, they carry different meanings and effects. The song subtly hints at the protagonist's inner conflict, where love feels overwhelming, yet there's a fear of whether it is true or fleeting.

The song "Kilimanjaro" is from the movie Enthiran (2010). The song's lyrics were written by Pa. Vijay and composed by A. R. Rahman. It is picturized on Rajinikanth and Aishwarya Rai, who sing a duet with a host of tribal dancers in the background. The song brought laughter and humour due to the funny costumes and cinematography. It is known for its vibrant energy, stunning visuals, and unique setting. The song was shot at Machu Picchu, one of the seven wonders of the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site in Peru. At that time, no Indian film had extensively featured Machu Picchu, which gives the song a unique global appeal. The song is the first Indian video to be picturized on the protected heritage site. The choice of location adds a sense of exoticism, mystery, and grandeur to the song. Aishwarya Rai wears vibrant tribal-inspired costumes reflecting African culture, while Rajinikanth's attire resembles that of a warrior king.

Features like elaborate jewelry, feathered headdresses, and vibrant fabrics create a fantasy-like effect. The song's music is a blend of African and Indian rhythms, creating a unique and captivating sound. The song's lyrics compare Rai's character to Mount Kilimanjaro, symbolizing grandeur, strength, and beauty. Despite the title, the song is filmed in a different wonder, showcasing a blend of cultural references. The song's success helped to promote cultural exchange and understanding between India and Peru.

"Pudhiya Manidha" is also a song from the same movie 'Enthiran' (2010). The song was composed by A. R. Rahman, and its lyrics were written by Vairamuthu. It is a song about the wonders of artificial intelligence and futuristic human evolution. The line "Pudhiya manidha bhoomikkuvaa, nalla ulagathai seiyyappo" translates to "New human, come to the earth and create a better world." AI and robotics were considered future wonders of the world. The concept of a new-age, evolved human being and futuristic cityscapes were other elements in this song. Here, Shankar treats technology as a modern wonder. Through this song, the Superstar's character, Dr. Vaseegaran, creates Chitti, a robot. He compares himself to Lord Brahma (the god who creates life on earth). He further says that Chitti is born from him, and his name is Endhiran, which means "Robot." It is an entry song about Chitti's creation, as he is made from melting steel and arrives on earth. They feed him knowledge through wires, just like the human embryo is fed through the umbilical cord. In the end, Chitti is ready to obey and serve humanity. The song explores several thought-provoking themes, including creation and innovation, human-machine relationships, identity, and existence.

"Enthiran Logathu Sundariye" is a song from the Tamil film 'Enthiran 2.0' (2018), a sequel to "Enthiran," released in 2010. The song's lyrics have been penned by Madhan Karkyand composed by A. R. Rahman. Both Rajinikanth and Amy Jackson play the lead roles in the film as robots. The word "Enthiran" means "robot," "Logathu" is a colloquial Tamil term that roughly translates to "in the world," and "Sundariye" means "beautiful woman." So, the song title "Enthiran Logathu Sundariye" means "The Beautiful Woman Among Robots" or "The Beauty in the Robot World." The song's lyrics explore themes such as love, technology, and the intersection of human emotions and artificial intelligence. It explores the theme of romance between two robots, Chitti (played by Rajinikanth) and Nila (played by Amy Jackson). The song celebrates the magic of robotics, AI, and the digital world.

The song "Merasalayitten" is from the 2015 Tamil movie 'I'. The song was composed by A. R. Rahman, and its lyrics were written by Kabilan. Chiyaan Vikram and Amy Jackson play the lead roles in the film. "Mersalaayitten" is a colloquial Tamil phrase meaning "I'm astonished." The hero is completely mesmerized by the heroine's beauty. He expresses that he is "mersalaayitten" (stunned) just by looking at her. The lyrics compare her features to precious things, emphasizing how extraordinary she looks. The song reflects youthful romance, excitement, and infatuation. The lyrics reflect love at first sight, with the hero praising every little detail about the heroine. The protagonist uses humorous and exaggerated comparisons to highlight his feelings. He says he is so affected that he feels like his brain has stopped working, a common way of expressing being love-struck in Tamil cinema songs. The hero compares her to trendy objects, technology, and urban life, making the song more relatable to modern audiences. The heroine transforms into a sleek bike, a gliding fish, a glowing television, a ringing phone, and a sprouting seedling, among other things. Morphing is one of the techniques used in this music video. It offers an innovative way for the subject to change its shape or form. This approach effectively conveys a message that enhances the overall impact of the video.

"Pookkale Satru Ooivedungal" is also from the same movie 'I'. The song was composed by A. R. Rahman, and the lyrics were penned by Madhan Karky. It is about the celebration of love, where the protagonist expresses his admiration and devotion to his beloved. The lyrics of the song metaphorically compare the beauty of the heroine to blooming flowers, vibrant nature, and heavenly wonders. Love is the main theme reflected in the film, which tells about identity and relationships. The song's visuals enhance its mood and atmosphere, with colours, textures, and styles carefully chosen to create a sense of wonder and enchantment. The song's mesmerizing visuals were shot on location in China's most picturesque landscapes, featuring the majestic Floating Mountains of Zhangjiajie, the surreal Karst Mountains and Li River in Guilin, the heavenly Tianmen Cave, vibrant Cherry Blossom Fields, and the Red Sea Beach in Panjin. Thus, it is a captivating song with stunning visuals, a soothing melody, and poetic lyrics.

Some more songs that incorporate technology as a theme include Mudhalvan's "Mudhalvanae", where secondary characters transform into snakes using visual effects and Computer-Generated Image. In Kadhalan's "Mukkala Mukkabla" the hero becomes invisible and in "Ennavale Adi Ennavale", his 2D soul flies with his lady love, showcasing the blend of technology and fantasy.

The Boys movie's "Ale Ale", which showcases time-freeze technology, where the characters move freely while the surroundings are frozen in time, achieved through the use of slow-motion and visual effects. Other notable songs that use exotic foreign locations as their backdrop include Anniyan's "Kumari", which was filmed at large tulip garden in Amsterdam, Netherlands; Shivaji's "Style" song, which was filmed at Spain's breath-taking Guggenheim Museum; Boys' "Ale", which was set against Australia's picturesque lavender fields; Nanban's "askulasku" song was shoot at famous tulip garden in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

Most songs gain popularity through films; Shankar's films often become popular due to their grand and visually stunning song sequences. They often feature exotic locations, advanced technology, and cultural diversity. A notable example is from the Enthiran movie, where there is no need for songs like "Kilimanjaro," which was shot in Mount Kilimanjaro, as it includes grand and magnificent locations. Since the movie is about robots, technology, and the digital world.

But Shankar intentionally added it to create a sense of wonder among the audience. Here, Aishwarya Rai and background dancers in African costumes showcase cultural diversity. Another song is "Poovukul" from the movie Jeans which was filmed across the Seven Wonders of the World. The inclusion of the iconic Seven Wonders in a single song serves as a symbolic representation of global unity. It's known for celebrating the artistic and architectural achievements from different countries. Aishwarya Rai's costumes, inspired by queens from various nations further emphasizes cultural diversity.

Shankar's use of exotic locations, advanced technology, and cultural diversity in song sequences has become a defining feature of his filmmaking style. This technique demonstrates Shankar's ability to blend storytelling with visual opulence, ensuring that even his songs leave an indelible impression on the audience. Furthermore, the choice of exotic locations gives the song a dreamlike, fantastical quality. His use of wonders and exotic landscapes extends beyond aesthetic appeal. It has a significant impact on audience perception and making the film appealing to everyone. Shankar intentionally incorporates these elements, creating a sense of wonder, celebrating global unity, and providing viewers with a unique cinematic experience that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

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