Marginalized Identities

Dimensions, Perspectives, and Problems

Edited by

Dr. Shehnaz Kabir

Dr. Dinaz R. Jeejeebhoy

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CELL,

LORETO COLLEGE,

KOLKATA

Loreto College, Kolkata

Marginalized Identities: Dimensions, Perspectives, and Problems
Edited by Dr. Shehnaz Kabir and Dr. Dinaz R. Jeejeebhoy

Published by Loreto College, Kolkata
7, Sir William Jones Sarani (Formerly Middleton Row)
Kolkata – 700 071, West Bengal, India.
E-Book - www. loretocollegeacademicpress.com

Copyright - Loreto College, Kolkata
Cover - ©Loreto College, Kolkata

Price: INR 300 | $ 12
First Edition - 2026

ISBN: 978-81-687101-0-8
ISBN 10 - 81-687101-0-X

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Printer: S. P. Communications Pvt. Ltd. 1st Floor, Merlin Marigold, 31B, Raja Dinendra St, Yogi Para, Garpar, Machuabazar, Kolkata, West Bengal 700009

Acknowledgement

This edited book stands as a testament to collaborative scholarship of the Research and Development Cell at Loreto College, Kolkata. This publication reflects our institutional commitment to advancing interdisciplinary critical dialogue and marks the commencement of a projected annual series.

We extend our profound gratitude to Sr. Dr. A. Nirmala, Teacher-in-Charge of Loreto College, whose steadfast support and encouragement were indispensable to this endeavour.

We are greatly obliged to our contributing authors for their compelling chapters and dedicated engagement throughout the publication process. Each submission underwent a rigorous double-blind peer-review process to ensure the highest standards of academic excellence. In this regard, we are deeply appreciative of the reviewers for their stringent evaluations, distinctive expertise, and dedication to constructive feedback which greatly enhanced the analytical depth of this volume.

Ultimately, it is an earnest hope of the Research and Development Cell that this volume makes a significant contribution to contemporary scholarship, while inspiring readers to reflect critically and empathetically on the realities faced by marginalized communities.

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the inaugural volume of Marginalized Identities: Dimensions, Perspectives and Problems, published by the Research and Development Cell of Loreto College, Kolkata.

In a world marked by persistent inequalities and evolving social realities, the study of marginalized identities remains both relevant and necessary. The essays in this volume engage with diverse experiences of exclusion, representation, resistance, and belonging, illuminating the complex ways in which identities are shaped by social, cultural, political, and historical forces. Bringing together perspectives from multiple disciplines, the collection contributes meaningfully to contemporary debates on equity, justice, and human dignity.

The breadth of themes explored—from indigeneity, caste, and gender to neurodiversity, statelessness, tribal communities, and queer identities—reflects the richness of current scholarship on marginalization. At the same time, these studies remind us that the voices from the margins are not merely subjects of inquiry but vital participants in the ongoing reimagining of society.

As the first volume of a projected annual series, this publication reflects Loreto College's commitment to fostering rigorous research and intellectual engagement with issues of contemporary significance. I am confident that it will serve as a valuable resource for scholars, researchers, and students alike.

I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Shehnaz Kabir, Research and Development Officer, and Dr. Dinaz Jeejeebhoy, Convenor of the Research and Development Cell, whose vision, dedication, and sustained efforts have been instrumental in bringing this volume to fruition. My appreciation also extends to the contributors and reviewers whose scholarly commitment has enriched this publication.

It is my hope that this volume will inspire further research, dialogue, and reflection on the many dimensions of marginalization, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences that shape our world.

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Interrogating the Look: Representing Indigeneity in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

The representation of Adivasis and tribal communities in Indian cinema has long mirrored the ideological anxieties of the nation-state, oscillating between romanticised otherness and fearful alterity. Indian cinema, particularly mainstream Bollywood and regional industries, has historically rendered indigeneity through lenses shaped by caste, class, and nationalist ideologies, often flattening the diverse experiences of tribal communities into essentialised tropes of primitiveness, victimhood, or militant resistance.

Adivasi women are either invisibilised or hypersexualised in cinematic portrayals. Their bodies often become symbolic battlegrounds of modernity vs. tradition, and their exploitation is an allegory for the nation's moral failure (e.g., Bandit Queen, Peepli Live). Rarely are they shown as agents of ecological wisdom, community leadership, or political resistance, despite their central role in real-life movements like Chipko or the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Keywords: *Representation, Adivasi women, Indian cinema, nation*

This paper explores the representation of indigeneity in Indian cinema, critically examining how tribal identities, particularly those of Adivasi communities, have been historically constructed through cinematic narratives. From

mythic romanticisation to vilification and victimhood, mainstream Indian cinema—especially Bollywood—has long operated within a framework that marginalises tribal voices, reinforcing stereotypes and homogenising the diverse lived experiences of Adivasi peoples. Drawing on postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and feminist critiques, this study interrogates the visual and narrative strategies that have rendered indigeneity either invisible or consumable within nationalist and developmentalist discourses.

While films such as *Aakrosh* (1980), *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa* (1998), *Chakravyuh* (2012), and *Newton* (2017) demonstrate an apparent shift towards more complex portrayals, they often perpetuate a cinematic gaze that positions Adivasis as mute symbols of resistance or casualties of progress, rather than autonomous agents. The gendered dimension of this erasure is particularly striking: Adivasi women are frequently portrayed as victims of violence or hypersexualised figures, reflecting the nation's discomfort with marginalised female bodies and their resistance to normative ideas of womanhood, respectability, and caste purity.

In contrast, the rise of counter-cinema—featuring independent documentaries, tribal filmmakers, and platforms like the Jharkhand International Film Festival—signals a decolonial turn in indigenous visual storytelling. These works resist the hegemonic tropes of mainstream Indian cinema and instead foreground self-representation, environmental justice, and land-based epistemologies. The paper argues that reimagining indigeneity in Indian cinema demands a radical epistemic shift: from spectacle to subjectivity, from representation to reclamation.

Laura Mulvey studies the significance of "look" in classical Hollywood cinema through a feminist reading;

cinema as "an advanced representation system" structures "ways of seeing" the woman as an image, and the man as "bearer of the look." Through Sigmund Freud's "scopophilia" (objectified look) and Jacques Lacan's conception of "mirror stage" (narcissism), Mulvey (8–11) explains how the pleasure of just looking at the screen splits into binary conceptions of active/male and passive/female. Though Mulvey's theory is significant in analysing the role of the camera in White American films, it becomes insignificant for Black female spectators.

While seeing or gazing is hegemonic on the one hand, seeing is also caring in another sense. Nathaniel Roberts discusses the relationship between seeing/looking and caste in a slum settlement in Tamil Nadu. For instance, he gives the example of the Tamil word "paar" which literally means 'seeing' or 'looking at' but which also means 'attending to' someone out of concern, acknowledging that person's presence, treating him or her as consequential" (*To Be Cared For 77*). He notes that according to the slum dwellers, the rich or caste people do not look at the poor, "they scrutinize … inspect … but they don't ever see you as a fellow human being" (Roberts 78). Hence, the look, which has power, is used in this context to neglect, ignore, and more so, to invisibilise the presence of the oppressed.

Bhiku (Om Puri) is a self-respecting tribal in *Aakrosh* who doesn't bow down to diktats of the lascivious forest contractor (Achyut Potdar). To teach him a lesson, the contractor, together with his friends (Arvind Deshpande, Mohan Agashe…) from the top echelons of the administration, rapes Bhiku's wife Nagi (Smita Patil) and kills her. They pass on the blame to Bhiku and the wretched soul goes silent to save his father and sister from the wrath of the so-called social contractors.

Bhaskar Kulkarni (Naseeruddin Shah), a fresh law graduate, fights his case against his mentor Dusane (Amrish Puri). Interestingly, Bhaskar is from the higher caste while Dusane is a tribal who has found partial acceptance in the social circle. He plays bridge with the local politician, police officer and the "sarkari" doctor but still gets threatening calls for trying to break caste barriers. Dusane's ambivalence towards the case is disturbing and unravels the complexities of the caste system. To Dusane, the truth is something that can be legally proved with proof. But we are placed in a system where financial prowess can win over witnesses. When Bhaskar talks of human dignity, Dusane shrugs him off. In fact, he is more confident than Bhaskar about the futility of fighting it out.

The tribal woman in *Aakrosh* (1980) is framed primarily as a victim of sexual violence, and her suffering is aestheticised to propel the male protagonist's moral awakening. Mulvey's theory helps expose how visual pleasure in such moments is derived not from empowerment, but from containment - her trauma serves the male protagonist's narrative arc. This trope connects to Gayatri Spivak's critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where the native woman becomes the silent terrain over which ideological battles are fought between development and resistance, tradition and modernity. Her body is thus instrumentalised within a masculine nationalist discourse that echoes Mulvey's concept of the narrative closure brought about through the "woman-as-spectacle."

Released just after the Emergency (1975–77), when state violence, suspension of rights, and corruption were national debates. Lahanya Bhiku's silence mirrors the silenced masses. Yet, his plight is explained through an urban lawyer (Naseeruddin Shah). The film critiques the failure of state

institutions but stops short of imagining tribal autonomy. Tribals are made to embody the mute victims of postcolonial democracy, useful as a moral conscience-check for the nation.

Set in Calcutta in the throes of the Naxalite movement, *Hazar Chaurasi ki Maa* (1998) is the story of a mother who wakes up one day to the devastating news that her son has been killed and reduced to a number at the morgue: corpse no. 1084. Written in 1973-74, when the Naxalite movement was on the wane, though pockets of resistance remained, Mahasweta Devi weaves the political in a personal story about a woman trying to understand why her son rebelled, what he was protesting against, and why he had to pay for it with his life. Questioning the world in the process, Sujata Chatterjee, who belongs to the largely apolitical upper echelons of society, also undergoes a journey of self-discovery and begins to question her place in a patriarchal world. Sujata was once the perfect wife, she had a shadowy existence as a subservient, silent, faithful woman. But when her favourite son, Brati, is killed, coincidentally on the eve of his birthday, she implodes.

The novel, adapted to the screen by Govind Nihalani in 1998, begins with Sujata waking up to severe pain. Appendicitis. It triggers memories of other pains she has had to endure — Brati's difficult birth. And death. She finds everyone's response to his death hypocritical. On the day of Brati's demise, his father, Dibyanath, who owns a chartered accountancy firm, is more concerned about how to hush up the circumstances of his son's death. He doesn't even allow Sujata to take his car to the morgue for fear of being identified. After hours of string-pulling, Dibyanath ensures newspapers omit his son's name in reports. Sujata slowly realises that the corruption of power at home mirrors the one outside — call

it the state, police, a deputy commissioner no less, the people who betrayed Brati and his friends or the ones who stayed silent.

Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa focuses more on the grief of the revolutionary's mother than the political subjectivities of the Naxalite and Adivasi collaborators. Shoma Chatterji observes that even when the narrative touches on tribal resistance, it is ultimately overshadowed by upper-caste maternal suffering, re-centering the gaze on bourgeois moral dilemmas rather than structural critique (Chatterji 145). The film is primarily about middle-class radicalisation and the disillusionment of an urban mother (Jaya Bachchan) after her son joins the Naxalite movement. The tribal question appears indirectly—as the cause or context of Naxal politics, not as the main subject. The narrative energy centers on the mother's grief and her discovery of "the truth" about the oppressed, rather than on tribal self-expression.

Nihalani does attempt to highlight issues of landlessness, displacement, and exploitation of Adivasis, which fuel the Naxalite insurgency. But the tribals remain background figures, their resistance mediated through the voices of educated urban revolutionaries. In other words, tribals are the "reason" for resistance, not the actors of resistance. The story relies on the figure of the sympathetic outsider (the grieving mother, the urban comrades) who "discovers" tribal exploitation and gives it legitimacy. This reproduces a familiar cinematic trope where tribals are unable to articulate their struggle without outside mediation — a problem similar to *Aakrosh* (1980).

The film does justice to empathy—it makes the urban audience confront the violence of the state and the plight of the marginalized. But it does not do justice to tribal resistance,

because it reduces resistance to either a background condition for Naxalism, or a metaphor for urban middle-class awakening. It leaves little room for tribal voices, strategies, or cultural forms of resistance to emerge.

Nandini Sundar notes that in both media and popular culture, Adivasis are often portrayed as "mute victims" rather than political actors with agency (45). Sanjukta Ghosh critiques Indian parallel cinema for relying on proxy figures (journalists, lawyers, mothers) who narrate subaltern struggles, thereby muting the subaltern voice itself (52). Ravi K. Dhar argues that Hindi cinema has historically failed to capture the "everyday modes of Adivasi resistance," reducing them to symbols within broader ideological conflicts (118).

In 1998 (Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa), India was reeling from liberalisation's social shocks, and cinema was still reluctant to grant tribals full political subjectivity—their plight became a backdrop to national ideological struggles (urban Naxal debates, middle-class anxieties). Post- 1991 liberalisation, India was in transition towards neoliberal reforms. By the late 1990s, the Naxalite movement was framed as both a violent threat and a failed utopia. Govind Nihalani frames tribal struggles as the backdrop for urban radicalism. The story of the mother re-centres middle-class mourning, not peasant agency. Tribals/Naxals are remembered as tragic casualties, but the state remains central. Their resistance is historicised as youthful folly, safely absorbed into the nationalist memory of sacrifice, without threatening the neoliberal order.

In *Chakravyuh* (2012), Prakash Jha attempts to explore the Maoist-insurgency-tribal question, but the tribal characters remain underdeveloped, primarily serving as narrative devices for the ideological conflicts between the

two male protagonists (Arjun Rampal and Abhay Deol). As Ashish Rajadhyaksha critiques *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid*, such films often replace tribal voices with ideological ventriloquism, reducing complex community struggles to metaphorical battlegrounds for state-versus-rebel discourse. The tribal women are either invisible or appear as mute supporters of Maoist men, their sexuality and agency effaced. The camera rarely inhabits their subjectivity or accords them a desiring gaze of their own. The result is a c i n e m a t i c space where a tribal woman is perpetually seen but never seeing — she is framed, not framing (214).

As with so many "issue-based" films, they end up being mere pegs to hang an ideology on. They aren't exactly caricatures, but their absolute consistency makes them flat. Their political positions are so clearly laid out – and they seem so utterly inflexible – that they come across as types rather than fully fleshed-out human beings (Gupta). Their dispossession from land and forest is acknowledged, but their political voice is absent—folded into the larger narrative of state-Maoist conflict. The film replays the development vs. rebellion binary. Tribals are "caught in the crossfire," never autonomous political actors articulating their own future. Released at a moment of intense mining expansion and land acquisition (2000s–2010s), the film reflects the neoliberal state's fear of insurgency as a sovereignty crisis. The anxiety is whether India's "growth story" can survive insurgency, not whether tribals can survive development. The state's sovereignty appears besieged, but the film reaffirms its legitimacy by presenting Maoist resistance as doomed. Tribals are depoliticised, reduced to casualties of a war over sovereignty.

Rajkummar Rao and Pankaj Tripathi are two of our best actors, on top of their game in *Newton* (2017). As polling officer Newton and CRPF commandant Atma Singh, they

also represent the two ends of one of the many divides that have polarised contemporary India. It's a face-off between idealism and cynicism, faith and conviction against scepticism and misgivings, unbending uprightness and involvement versus dissipation and apathy. One is on a mission to conduct free and fair elections in Dandakaranya in conflict-ridden Chhattisgarh; the other, having seen many such polls, regards it as just a mock-up — does anyone truly care about an election? The nation's own dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes play out in this battle of the contrarian forces and pulls.

It's a short, straightforward and simple film but far from simplistic. Director Amit Masurkar uses humour to make his point than get all moralistic, being quietly effective rather than shrill. For instance, what could be more ironical than a politician selling the idea of laptops and mobiles as "development" to the most backward of regions in the country? Not just the politicians, everyone is at the receiving end of writer Mayank Tewari and Masurkar's wit — the political and administrative machinery, the CRPF and the insurgents, even Newton's middle-class parents. Child marriage, dowry, bribery, corruption, class divides, our obsession with English, Hindi dominance, cultural homogenisation — there's much that is up for questioning. Even Newton is not spared, whose pride in his integrity overruns his honesty itself.

The only innocent ones here are the tribals — caught between the state machinery and the insurgents. All that the tribals want is the correct price for Tendu leaves, but all they translate as is a vote bank. Masurkar lays bare the deficiency of democracy, yet there is an underlying belief in it. The only weapon the tribals have is the vote and an active participation in democracy is the way out. Will democracy itself survive? The telling image of the election party moving

through the jungles under CRPF protection says a lot in its absurd poignancy.

Amit Masurkar's black comedy follows Newton, an earnest election officer, sent to conduct voting in a Maoist-affected Chhattisgarh village. The satire lies in showing how electoral sovereignty is staged, not enacted. Tribals are cast as absent subjects of democracy—needed for legitimacy, but structurally voiceless. By 2017, the discourse is less about armed sovereignty (Maoists vs. state) and more about democratic sovereignty's credibility. The state's anxiety is: can it still perform democracy in spaces hollowed out by extractivism?

In Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of the pedagogic and the performative (294-95), the pedagogic Nation is an already-established entity, narrated through official history, laws, rituals, and institutions. It is linear, continuous, and prescriptive. The performative Nation on the other hand is a living, contested practice that emerges in the everyday. It disrupts the pedagogic by foregrounding ambivalence, negotiation, and the voices at the margins. In *Newton*, the electoral process is presented as a pedagogic script of the Indian nation-state. The bureaucrat Newton (Rajkummar Rao) embodies this—he believes in the sanctity of the electoral ritual as the very essence of democracy. The arrival of the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), the polling booth, the security apparatus, and the insistence on recording the tribal votes illustrate the didactic function of the state, teaching democracy to its most "backward" subjects. The tribals are constructed as passive students in this pedagogic narrative: they do not demand elections, nor do they understand its language. Their role is to enact the state's democratic sovereignty by being counted.

The performative disrupts this script. The absurdity of dragging tribals to vote under armed supervision exposes democracy not as a sacred pedagogic truth but as a contingent performance. The tribals' indifference (and at times quiet resistance, such as their bewildered stares or silence) undermine the pedagogic narrative. The act of voting becomes hollow—less about empowerment, more about staging democracy for the global/national gaze. Even Newton's idealism—his insistence on rule-following—becomes a performance of democratic virtue, highlighting the gap between democratic ideals and their lived practice. *Newton* does offer glimpses of Adivasi presence through the lens of electoral democracy. However, as Udaya Kumar (2018) argues, the narrative is still "seen through the bureaucrat's eyes," and the Adivasi villagers remain largely silent, enigmatic, or ambivalent. Their agency is subordinated to the moral anxieties of the protagonist, a pattern that echoes what Anand Pandian (2009) critiques in his ethnographic work *Crooked Stalks*, where "development" is often framed in cinema as something done to the Adivasi, not with or by them.

In sum, while these films offer critical perspectives on violence, state oppression, and revolutionary politics, they rarely allow Adivasi characters full narrative or discursive autonomy. Their subjectivity is mediated, ventriloquized, or eclipsed by the ethical crises of the dominant caste viewer or character. True cinematic decolonisation, as scholars like Ravi Vasudevan (2010) suggest, would require a reframing of Adivasi experience as central, articulate, and self- narrating—not merely symbolic or symptomatic of national crises (42). From *Chakravyuh* to *Newton*, we see a shift in how tribals are positioned. In *Chakravyuh*, they are mute victims of violence, reduced to collateral in the sovereignty battle between Maoists

and the state. In *Newton*, they are absent democratic subjects, summoned only to enact the spectacle of voting. Both films reveal a post-1991 neoliberal anxiety: how to reconcile rapid capital-intensive "development" with the need to maintain sovereignty over territories marked by resource wealth and tribal resistance.

In both, tribals remain outside the frame of voice—they are necessary as figures of legitimacy (to "save" from Maoists or to "include" in democracy), but their own epistemologies of politics and resistance are erased. Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Sanjay Kak have critiqued how visual culture reproduces the state's anxious gaze, rather than tribal epistemologies. A growing number of independent films and tribal filmmakers are reclaiming indigeneity from the margins. Films by Adivasi directors or writers, such as the documentaries produced by Video Volunteers or Adivasi Resurgence, aim to reverse the gaze. The Jharkhand International Film Festival (JIFF) has become a site for indigenous self-representation. Examples such as Jal Satyagraha (a documentary on people's resistance to submergence and displacement due to dams) or Mai Ghat (depicting the custodial death of a tribal woman) mark a radical shift in cinematic grammar. Unlike Bollywood's tribal imagery—mute, victimised, or hyper-resistant—these works foreground embodied experience and voice. They employ local languages, oral traditions, folk music, and non-linear storytelling, effectively challenging the hegemonic cinematic language of realism and spectacle. These works challenge dominant cinematic language and offer space for self-representation rather than representation by others. Unlike national festivals that often tokenise tribal films, JIFF creates a community-centred space where tribal cinema circulates on its own terms. Here, Adivasi filmmakers articulate lived realities of displacement, mining, forest rights, and

gendered violence without translating them into the idioms of a "national allegory" meant for metropolitan audiences. This resonates with Homi Bhabha's idea of the performative nation, where marginalised groups interrupt the pedagogic script of nationalism through cultural practices.

What is at stake here is not simply "better representation" but a politics of form and spectatorship. These films refuse the "phallocentric gaze" (Mulvey) and the neoliberal humanitarian gaze that positions Adivasis as "objects of pity." Instead, they forge reciprocal spectatorship, where tribals are not only subjects but also audiences. The camera becomes a tool of reclamation, not surveillance. Thus, the rise of Adivasi filmmaking and film festivals signals a cultural decolonisation of cinema in India, pushing against the nation-state's homogenising narratives and allowing indigeneity to emerge from the margins as a vibrant site of resistance and renewal.

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Manual Scavengers in India: A Marginalized Community

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Abstract

Manual scavenging represents one of the most dehumanizing forms of labour in contemporary India, where individuals from historically marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, are compelled to manually remove human excreta from dry latrines, sewers, and septic tanks. This caste-based occupational practice epitomizes structural violence and perpetuates social exclusion despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, legally abolished this practice, yet implementation remains severely inadequate. According to the 2018 socio-economic survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, approximately 42,303 manual scavengers were identified across India, though civil society organizations argue the actual number exceeds several hundred thousand due to chronic underreporting and reluctance to document this stigmatized occupation. The majority of manual scavengers belong to Scheduled Castes, with specific sub-castes like Valmikis, Balmikis, Chuhra, and Mehtar communities bearing the disproportionate burden of this occupation across generations.

The health hazards faced by manual scavengers are catastrophic, with workers regularly exposed to toxic

gases including hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, and methane while cleaning sewers without protective equipment. The Safai Karamchari Andolan reports that between 2017 and 2022, more than 340 sewer deaths occurred, with workers succumbing to asphyxiation, drowning, or toxic exposure. Beyond physical dangers, the psychological trauma of social ostracization creates profound mental health challenges within these communities. Manual scavengers experience systematic exclusion from mainstream society through residential segregation, denial of temple entry, restricted access to public water sources, and limited educational opportunities for their children. This occupational stigma creates an intergenerational poverty trap, as children of manual scavengers' face discrimination in schools and limited employment prospects outside their parents' occupation, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Economic exploitation further compounds their vulnerability, with most manual scavengers earning meager wages below minimum wage standards, lacking formal employment contracts, social security benefits, or health insurance coverage. The rehabilitation provisions mandated under the 2013 Act, including alternative livelihood training, financial assistance, and scholarship programs for children, have witnessed abysmally low implementation rates. The intersectionality of caste, class, and gender creates additional layers of marginalization, as women constitute a significant proportion of manual scavengers yet remain invisible in official documentation and policy discourse. Despite technological alternatives like mechanized sewer-cleaning equipment and the construction of modern sanitation infrastructure, municipalities continue employing manual scavengers due to cost considerations and entrenched caste prejudices. Addressing this humanitarian crisis requires

comprehensive strategies encompassing strict enforcement of anti-manual scavenging legislation, substantial investment in sanitation infrastructure, robust rehabilitation programs with genuine economic alternatives, anti-discrimination campaigns challenging caste-based occupational hierarchies, and meaningful participation of affected communities in policy formulation. The continuous cases of manual scavenging have been found in this nation, as reflected in the states of West Bengal, Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu since 2021 and is still ongoing till 2025. The persistence of manual scavenging in twenty-first-century India represents a moral failure of society and state, demanding urgent transformative action to restore dignity and justice to these systematically oppressed communities.

Keywords: *Manual scavenging, Dalits, Caste-based occupation, Social exclusion, Structural violence.*

Introduction

According to the 2018 socio-economic survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, approximately 42,303 manual scavengers were identified across India (Chhabra, 2019). Based on the characteristics or attributes like race, gender, sexuality, caste, socio-economic status and disability, a group of individuals or individuals in general often face systematic disadvantage, economic discrimination and a complete exclusion from the society, and this is outlined to be the social identities of the marginalised groups (Darity & Ruiz, 2024). The analytical guideline of intersectionality, forged by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is effective for comprehending this phenomenon (Law.columbia.edu, 2017). The revelation is shaped as per the ways in which the overlapped social identities like for instance a poor Dalit woman, might generate unique as well as compound

experiences of oppression which are not a simple assimilation of individualistic discriminatory approaches (Sharma, 2022).

One of the economically depriving jobs that a marginalised community in contemporary India is mostly associated with is that of the manual scavengers (Jha et al., 2025). The practice of manual scavenging dates back in history, with the approach of employing individuals who are responsible to maintain cleanliness of dry latrines, sewers and septic by following to manually clean human excreta and other forms of dirt (hrw.org, 2014). It is still India's one of the most dehumanising and persistent forms of caste-based oppression, which still operates despite being outlawed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act in 2013 (Fathima & Raju, 2024).



Figure 1: A Manual Scavenger. (Source: Paliath, 2021).

While manual scavenging persists throughout the belts of India, the situation in West Bengal projects a harrowing image or extension of the exploitation and its levels as recently seen in the 2021 Kudghat incident resulting in the death of four manual scavengers in the past 3 months (Chatterjee, 2025). The state

of India has responded to this characterised discrimination against a community by legal performativity, which brings no effective action to resolve the issue. With the presence of laws and regulations of the Supreme Court of India, the aspects of rehabilitation and compensation are forwarded however, remaining abysmal in the agenda of revolving the cases (nls.ac.in, 2025). In India, the loss of lives in sewers has amounted to over 400 since 2018, which is an officially recorded number that in reality might be higher (Staff, 2022). The nation of India, along with the state of West Bengal, illustrates to require a move beyond the basic regulatory field and to enforce a radical shift towards social and moral imagination. The efficient rehabilitation should generate sustainable actions like proper education, opportunities towards a better livelihood and housing facilities. The nation should come forward in order to dismantle the current presence of caste-based livelihood, essentially within the agenda of manual scavengers (Saldanha et al., 2022). The continued presence of manual scavengers in the society is a constant and brutal reminder that modern society is indeed built upon the blood and tears of marginalised communities who are pressured to remain, so that the continuation of the hierarchy is protected (Kumari, 2024).

Review of Literature

Practice of Manual Scavenging: A de-humanising Approach to Labour

As argued by Chawla, (2024), manual scavenging reduces and transforms the agency of human beings to an instrument of disposing of society's most toxic waste, which is the waste of their fellow humans' excretion. The deliberate imposition of discarding the filth with social exclusion and inviting certain diseases which are forwarded within this

community, solely the features based on their birth-based castes. Chawla, (2024), states that this stripping away of the dignity and the treatment of these individuals replicate the tendencies of a human while handling disposable items. The scavengers are treated way less than labourers and not as much as human beings who deserve basic human rights like safety, security and respect (Nambiar & Abhisha K, 2025).

By being an almost exclusive hereditary caste duty of the lower-segment of the community hierarchies, manual scavenging is not merely an occupation rather a painful and constant reminder of their social stand and position. A variety of subgroups within Dalits, featuring Valmiki and Dome communities have been facing a similar agenda-which is deeply embedded within the Brahmanical concept of "ritual purity" (Cherechés, 2024). By this concept, the work for sanitation is considered as "polluting" which is automatically delegated to the ones who are seated at the lowest levels of the social prism (Cherechés, 2024). As argued by Gopal Guru, this categorised segregation of individuals originating from such class structure and are given a specific duty, might be described as a form of "sanitation apartheid", which is still a crisis within the scenario of West Bengal, a state in India (hklawoffices.in, 2020).

A featured study emphasising on the practice of "bone scavenging" in Birbhum, Coch Behar and Siliguri regions of the state (Kunjappan. & Chandra, 2025). In this practice, the marginalised Dalits, who are already deprived economically, socially and opportunity-wise are cornered so much that they are even forced to be engaged in the practice of collecting human bones from cremation grounds and graveyards to sustain (Chandran, 2020). This showcases a systematic and brutal failure of the society which results in rampant class and caste-based exploitation, in which individuals or groups

of similar individuals are reduced to an extent to which, the dignity of the dead is much higher than the living ones.\

Role of Caste Politics in the Persisting Presence of Manual Scavenging

Karamchedu, (2025), in the paper outlines the persistent presence of manual scavenging which is a practice that is embedded within the society, and even within the state's own legal and economic frameworks. The presence of multiple laws and regulations have determined the fact that it has been banned by practice in the legal arena, however, in practice the picture remains different. The state's agencies and institutional bodies like the municipalities and railway bodies are still directly employing manual scavengers to maintain sanitation, thus, keeping the toxic tradition on (Yachu, 2025). The presence of caste hierarchies grants deeper social sanction towards the agenda that only Dalits must perform this "polluting" labour, which furthermore de-humanises them. The state integrates these by categorically undercounting workers, re-classifying the deadly sewer cleaning job as a "hazardous work" for avoiding any legal accountability (Kundu, 2025). Moreover, the aspect of liabilities is also removed from the considerations by following to outsource the jobs to the contractors thus, maintaining caste ideology while also enforcing the dehumanising labour.

Similarly, Rajan, (2024), illustrates the association of caste politics that perpetuates the integration of manual scavenging as a practice that is omnipresent within a state's cultural, social and economic framework. The prevalence of caste system associates the practice of pushing the "menial jobs", likely that of handling of human wastes, to another community as has been described as the duty of Dalits, who are usually considered to be the "untouchable" segment of the social hierarchy (Dandapat & Tripathi, 2025). The paper

outlines the ways in which the social sanction has normalised this approach, with politically reserving the objective towards upliftment. This is resulting due to the deeper-seated caste hierarchy that builds a situation in which almost 1.3 million Dalits are pushed towards this vulnerable and degrading work (Pasic, 2022).

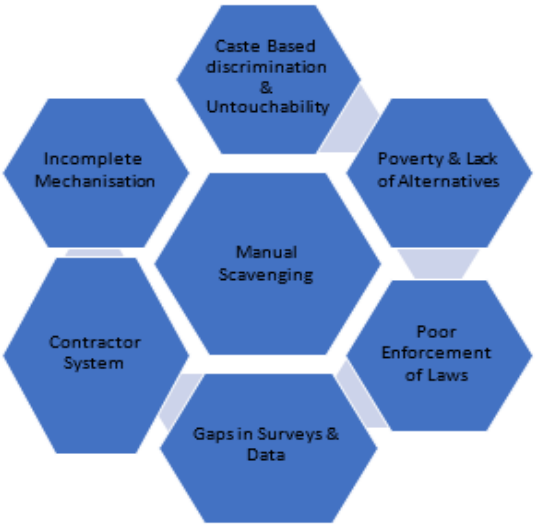


Figure 2: Reasons for Continued Manual Scavenging in India.

A Lack of Political Will

Anurag, (2025), in this paper outlines a lack of political will to be one of the central factors being accountable for the continuation of the practice manual scavenging. The state as Anurag, (2025), argues highlights the fact that it exhibits the sense of "apathy" and a total generation of "indifference" with politics that does not concern their cause. Moreover, with "poor enforcement" and with a substantial absence of robust and proactive integration of regulations and rules discrediting the manual scavenging practices are seen. Thus, critically the political will of the government denies

the presence of the practice which exists, by suppressing the available information and pressuring to claim that there are zero incidents happening (Bajoria, 2023). This precisely calculated denial and inaction towards barring such inhuman practice is present within the framework of the privileged caste culture, which ties the structure together and stops it from getting dismantled.

The persistence of manual scavenging can be directly attributed to a shortage of governmental commitment. The article claims that there is excessive indifference and wilful carelessness in the actualisation of laws and social projects. Important governmental organisations, such as the railways and towns, openly dispute the method and some file fraudulent affidavits to prove it does not exist. Despite legislative restrictions, this institutional denial and inability to enforce laws allows the practice to continue.

Situations of Practical Instances in India

A total of five case studies is to be forwarded here to outline the aspects of manual scavenging in India and its implications on the lives of the individuals who are involved in it. This practice of hazardous sanitation practices in India has resulted in hundreds of deaths in a single year, and one such incident in 2021 Kolkata Kudghat region changed the scenario, in which a total of 4 sanitation workers died while cleaning sewers (Chatterjee, 2025). In Delhi, multiple sanitation workers have died after inhaling toxic gases while cleaning sewers, which forced the media and civil society to renew this call for dignity, strict accountability and mechanisms (Mehta, 2024).

Moreover, in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, three Dalit workers have died of asphyxiation while cleaning a sewage tank, which in turn has outlined the concurrent and present

issue of caste-based vulnerabilities for the communities which resulted due to the absence of protective gears and amenities (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). Four more manual scavengers migrated from Bihar, were found to have suffocated inside a septic tank in Surat, Gujarat and died, thus, showcasing the migratory marginalised segment of the society's implications (Newindianexpress.com, 2023). Another region of Haryana also saw the death of four sanitation workers, after inhaling poisonous gases while properly maintaining a sewer (ndtv.com, 2022). Thus, with a collective approach these cases primarily outline the systematic discrimination that the marginalised, migratory and lower-sections of the societies goes through, as resulted due to the multi-fold reasons like caste systems, lack of political well and political practices.

Methodology

Case Study Analysis

A case study analysis is an approach towards researching a theme with in-depth analysis as emphasised on illustration of a contemporary phenomenon as against the real-world context (Crowe et al., 2022). The approach of case study analysis outlines a single or a complicated instance, involving people, groups, business, policy and events which are required to comprehend its dynamic and underlying principles. Thus, the qualitative approach here highlights an in-depth evaluation with a focus on context-based analysis. Case study analysis's objective is to eradicate the aspects of generalising statistically yet to provide rich information and explore specific pathways to understand the situations with precision (Babbie, 2021)

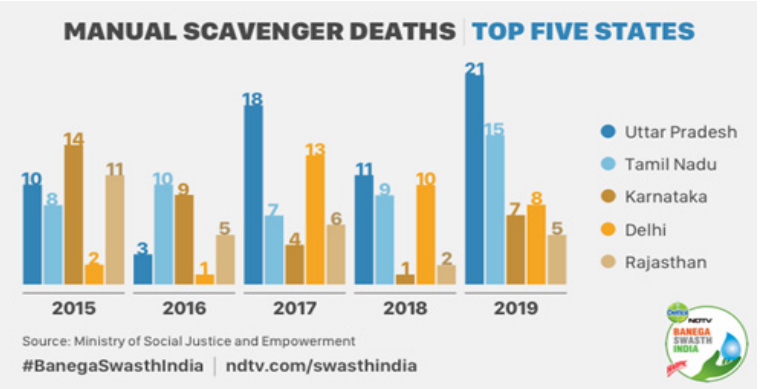


Figure 3: Death Rates of Manual Scavengers. (Source: Mathur & Bhaskar, 2020).

The case study-based investigation is crucially required as manual scavenging is not a monolithic incident, rather it has layers of complications and issues as shaped by regional, caste, class, government and social tenets (Ridder, 2017). A singular incident in this matter will fail to capture the complicated scenario of the issue. Moreover, by associating and evaluating five such incidents as outlined above, this has permitted a comparative analysis of the ways in which the different governments were incorporating or subverting the central regulatory approaches (like the 2013 Act). It will aid to reveal the trend of a lack of political will, administrative insensitivity along with regionalised resistance. Additionally, these case studies are relevant to be included as it creates a broader image in which local and central-driven systematic failures are uplifted that is precisely discriminating against a social group.

Secondary Data-Usage Evaluation

The paper here is strictly based on secondary data as sourced from the governmental reports, academic literature, news articles and media archives (Perez-Sindin, 2017). With circumstantial difficulties present to collect first-hand information from the manual scavengers in India, the investigation is crucially based on including information from the secondary sources for evaluation.

The statistical insights on manual scavengers or any types of cleaners in India are found from the governmental information as collected from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. A proper triangulated approach with counter-information is resulting from the Dalit-based firms like Safai Karamchri Andolan (SKA) alongside the reports from the bodies like National Human Rights Commission (PTI, 2022). Moreover, in the paper here, peer-reviewed articles, journals and academic knowledge are also to be involved to present the framework of knowledge that will evaluate the theoretical and practical basis of caste, class, discrimination, societal programs and its human repercussions.

The usage of secondary information is highly presentable for illustrating a macro-level, policy-based and historical evaluation that is spread throughout multiple states, in which the paper's aim is understood. The utilisation of secondary information is highly relevant for constructing a macro-level and insightful basis of policy-based analysis throughout the multiple states of India, that are facing similar challenges of manual scavenging (sawtoothsoftware.com, 2024). The involvement of secondary information permits for longitudinal monitoring of legislation, scheme incorporation and discourse over decades, which illustrates a scope of impracticality of the primary research.

Despite having multiple advantages, the secondary information-based research includes multiple limitations as well. The most crucial disadvantage is the potential unreliability and politically manipulated data are present, which often creates an imbalance between the real issues and the propaganda factors (Mora, 2022). Moreover, it might create a nuanced absence of embodied presence and encounters of the scavengers which is precisely provided by the studies of ethnography. These factors are to be resolved by focusing on centering the Dalit and marginalised voices with focusing more on SKA information while increasing the access to collecting first-hand experience-driven information from the manual scavengers in India.

Findings & Discussion

Case Study No. 1: 2021 in Kolkata, West Bengal

The initial incident that took place regarding the manual scavengers and its dangerous implications has resulted in the death of 4 young cleaners from Malda, took place in Kolkata in the year 2021 (Staff, 2025). It was come to light that all four these cleaners died resulted from the toxic fumes which they inhaled, however, featuring how these are not an isolated accident rather a systematic and continued failure of the nation towards safeguarding and securing to provide better working conditions to a certain section of the workers, who are also socially discriminate (Chatterjee, 2025). This dehumanising labour of manual scavenging has been taken under the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court, which passed a landmark ruling statement which holds the Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the state-based authorities the main culprits (Das, 2025).

The work is primarily dehumanising in which a fellow human's labour is commodified to an extent in which they

might lose their lives and can be disposed of at will. The Court noted that a crucial tracking process under the mechanisms of Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers Act, 2013 were effectively not illustrated in execution in Kolkata (Staff, 2025). The complete violation of the law features the class-based political economy that is present here, which has exclusively featured this job for the Dalits or the marginalised communities of the societies. The nation, via its municipalities, contractors and railway agencies are still remaining the relevant and primary employers to not only embed but also to increase the actions.

A complete absence of political will was seen in this case of the nation, as the police filed a perfunctory FIR against the "unidentified persons" with the Court mandating a thirty lakh rupees compensation to the deceased families-which failed to concretely solve the issue (Chatterjee, 2025). The presence of such apathy is nationwide, with regulations being present on paper yet they find no ways to get executed in the reality segment, which has outlined the aspects of evading liability and a refusal to invest in machines that might potentially replace humans.

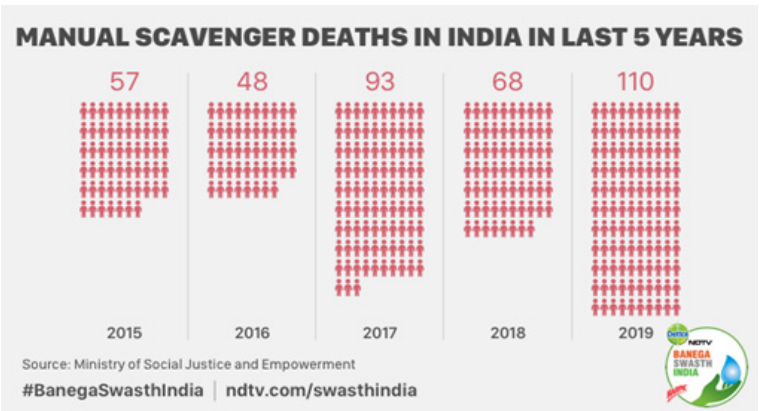


Figure 4: Death rates of Manual Scavengers in India. (Source: Mathur & Bhaskar, 2020)

Case Study No.2: 2022 in Faridabad, Haryana

A similar situation of death of four sanitation workers occurred in the next year, in 2022, at a hospital in Faridabad, Haryana which is not a tragic anomaly but is a predictable system that categorically targets Dalits and marginalised communities to live their lives at the expense of other's ignorance (Dogra, 2022). Haryana's incident projects a stark image of the reality which features a dehumanising core of the manual scavenging in Indian society, the way cheap labour and its source are exploited with presentation of no dignity and respect.

The sanitation workers-Vishal, Ravi, Ravi Goldar and Rohit were made to clean and enter a manhole without having any basic security and safety tool, which is known to be the direct violation of the 2013 Act (ndtv.com, 2022). All four of them died resulting from the toxic gases that caused asphyxiation for them, and this should be dubbed as a 'social murder' with a systematic faulty system that is based on the neglect which cost the lives of marginalised individuals. The practice that is featured with neglect, cost-cutting and convenience has got the priority before the aspect of protecting human life, which in a sense dehumanises and reduces the human agency to be a disposable instrument.

The incident's occurrence and the following case which unfolded outlines the agenda of caste politics which perpetuates the whole system. The work is outsourced via a labyrinth of contractors and venders, in here it was named 'Santosh Allied Service', involving a deliberate strategy which makes them evade legal duties and accountabilities (ndtv.com, 2022). The reduction of human agency and the sense of projecting security to their cause are reduced resulting from commodifying their working force with contractualization.

This process makes their labour informal, unprotected, homogenous and can be easily replaceable-which was correlated with the contemporary economic association of caste-based discrimination and alienation.

The repetitive nature of these incidents underlines a complete lack of political will which should have been featured to eliminate all sorts of oppression and alienation of a community from the society. The role of the state towards transforming from prosecutor to perpetrator has failed to ensure rehabilitation processes for this community that has been resulting in more deaths in the upcoming years.

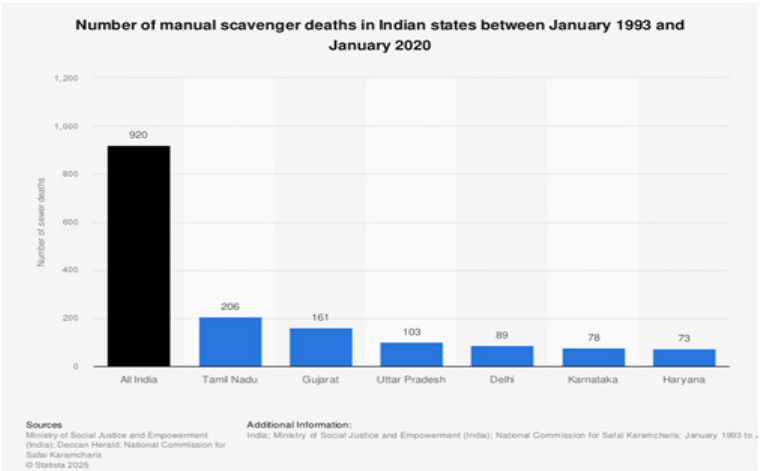


Figure 5: Death Rates in India till 2020. (Source: Galal, 2020).

Case Study No.3: 2023 in Surat, Gujarat

Similar to the above cases, four migrant workers from Bihar, died while manually scavenging a septic tank in Surat, Gujarat (Staff, 2023). This projects a repetitive and grim reality of India in which the practice of manual scavenging is still embodying the inhuman approach towards labour and is fortified on the basis of the complete absence of the political will of the state.

Four men in Gujarat died resulting from asphyxiation, which is a common killer in these cases, highlights the dehumanising and lethal conditions that illustrate this work (Newindianexpress.com, 2023). They were pushed to clean a confined space filled with toxic gases without them carrying any safety tools, thus performing a task which society has bestowed upon them against their lower positioning in the social hierarchy. Stripped of all human agencies, respect, safe working conditions and dignity, they were dubbed as the waste disposal garbage tools, which fundamentally goes against the Indian Constitution which promises to provide each and every one with equal opportunities and respect (Ncsk.nic.in, 2020).

As argued above, with the issues Haryana and Bengal, a deep-seated caste politics have also been seen here in Gujarat. Migrant workers, who are usually emerging from the lower strata of the social framework, illustrate to be familiar victim segments, as the occupation of manual scavenging crucially remained a work of Dalit communities and their sub-groups in certain matters (Staff, 2023). The factory-based recruitment here used the workers to clean a septic tank, without following the regulation to use mandated machines, thus reflecting the positioning of the society and the executive legacy of Indian rules and laws among its people. The geographical displacement of the labourers from Bihar to Gujarat illustrates how economic desperation is often-based on caste-driven landlessness and poverty which are the grave cases of modern India.

Case Study No.4: 2024 in Delhi, the Capital of India

Since 2021, the situation did not release any redemption or strategy from the side of the state or its associated agencies, which would have permanently eradicated the practice of

manual scavenging. This proved to be right when in 2024, at the centre of India's republican democracy, 4 individuals died resulting from the toxic gas impacts while cleaning sewer and similar establishments with no security and safety towards their working conditions (Lakshman, 2025). Harikrishna Prasad, Yashdev, Ramasrey and Deshraj-all of these individuals, distinctively died while cleaning sewers at Rohini Mall, at a sewage treatment plant in Kondili and gutter in Pillanji villages, respectively (Mehta, 2024). Even though these individual manual scavengers died apart from each other, every incident reflects the similar image of negligence and discrimination.

These workers are often faced with marginalisation due to their backgrounds, thus, getting trapped in certain occupations due to extreme poverty and are forced to work in uncompromising conditions, which threatens and even ends their lives. The practice of manual scavenging comes to individuals or a group which gets this social deviation and are forced to follow the caste-based occupation, despite having other choices and goals. Despite having legal regulation like the Act 2013, features how the lack of political will is not the only case here, rather a collective rejection of obedience of such rules from the Indian society are emanated (spaceandculture.in, 2025). Each of these deaths were tragedies that could have been prevented with the fostering of genuine political will and an inclusion of effective constitutional protection towards the dignity and safety of its people.

Case Study No.5 : 2025 in Tamil Nadu

The last case study outlines the death of three manual scavengers namely Venugopal, Hari Krishnan and Saravanan in Tamil Nadu, who went to clean the sewage tank, which increased the omnipresent crisis as presented. Moreover, this

incident outlines the practice and its present existence since 2021, with no signs of improvement and development (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). As it has been arguably one of the most dehumanising agenda to make use of human labour, which results in hundreds of deaths each year, and is still continuing. The workers here, in Tamil Nadu all belonged from Scheduled Caste (SC), which is a lower group from the social hierarchy that are eternally marginalised and dominated by other segments of the society (Kumar M & Fathima, 2025). The common killer asphyxiation occurred while they all entered a 7-ft tall deep tank which choked them to death. This practice is thus not only lethal but also degrading to the agencies of human lives which forces them to be nothing but a discarding tool for cleaning and maintaining places that no others want to visit.

The nation's reaction to the manual scavenging fatalities demonstrates an extreme absence of political determination. While reactive strategies like registering a formal complaint and reimbursement obligations are available, they are ineffective in addressing problem structures. There have been no prosecutions for those killed worldwide, and the failure to execute present regulations enable nations to avoid consequences by lying about statistics. Tamil Nadu holds the biggest incidence of septic or sewer reservoir mortality in India. The current pattern of shifting dangerous jobs to excluded individuals goes on unabated unless societal-based ideas are fixed and official backing of justice and industrialisation is established.

Conclusion

The paper here rightfully labels the practice manual scavenging as a de-humanising approach to labour, which is precisely and deliberately shaped by caste politics and

positioning of the same. The focus of the research was clearly stated in the beginning of this investigation, which highlighted how to decode the practice of manual scavenging that is an illegal happening, yet a commonly used aspect to maintain cleanliness as a cost of someone's life. A systematic review of literature was forwarded that focused on the ongoing practice of manual scavenging and certain grave reasons for it, likely that of caste politics, social discrimination, class hierarchy and blatant absence of political will-which proves to be relevant for removing such practices.

Then in the following part of this research, the investigation outlined 5 case studies which were essential to illustrate the issue of manual scavenging and its ongoing practice in India. A chronological presentation of the incidents, taking place within the regions of Kolkata (2021), Haryana (2022), Surat (2023), Delhi (2024) and in Tamil Nadu (2025) have been outlined in this paper, showcasing a continuous approach of this practice that is surviving on the evil practice of manual scavenging that dehumanises the agency of humanity and its basic tenets. The summary of these 5 instances resonates a larger or broader image in which the illegal practice is still continuing in India, which clearly reflects the ways in which lack of political will and caste politics are collectively destroying a social community.

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Disparities in Inclusion: The Higher Education Paradox in Urban India

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Abstract

This chapter examines the multidimensional complexities that continue to shape the lived experiences of marginalized identities navigating through higher education in urban India. While diversity within universities is increasingly visible in the recent past, inclusion continues to be unevenly experienced. The presence of students from marginalized communities does not translate to equal participation or adequate representation within the institutional structures. The Indian education system and its inherent variance is often identified through the coexistence of differentiating ideologies, religions, castes, classes, genders, sexualities, orientations, disabilities and socio-economic inequity whilst enduring several discrepancies in the process towards absolute integration. The current accessibility provisions such as inclusive enrolments and multidisciplinary courses have potentially introduced these marginalized communities into mainstream higher education; however, acceptance and support systems are relatively conditional. This study further mentions the need for reforming existing policies whilst addressing internalized disparities that produce both subtle and overt barriers within the educational premises. Additionally, highlighting the inconsistences that restricts

the gradual progress from inclusivity as a symbolic norm to a shared responsibility.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education; Marginalized Identities; Higher Education in India; Social Inequality; Urban Universities.*

Introduction

Inclusivity in higher education is predominantly discussed as an achieved ideal, one that is incorporated in policy frameworks as well as reinforced through institutional narratives of progress. However, in actuality, the everyday complexities of marginalized identities remain to be unacknowledged. In urban higher education, diversity has been increasingly visible in the past decade yet inclusion is far from being evenly experienced. Equitable educational opportunities allegedly emphasise on the passive relativity of any personal or social circumstance in achieving absolute inclusion (Mishra and Pettala, 2023). However, this variance between inclusivity as it is postulated and as it is lived, forms the central paradox of contemporary higher education.

Marginalized identities in institutions are mostly determined by the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, disability, religion, language, socio-economic status etc. Access to higher education for majority and minority communities have expanded through formal mechanisms including modified admission policies, merit frameworks as well as interdisciplinary courses. Despite these attempts, participation remains uneven and often restrictive. Inclusion can be effectively created and maintained when these efforts are supported by contextually relevant organizational practices that promote equitable participation and mutual understanding (Bernstein et al. 2020). Teaching and learning in this day, primarily centralises curriculum design, classroom interactions and academic

expectations that even in its subtlety continue to privilege dominant forms of knowledge and expression. This contrast eventually tends towards selective inter-group interactivity, reinforcing the existing hierarchies rather than making it more equitable. What is frequently perceived as progressive social cohesion, is in reality a space for symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion.

Formal academic structures almost neglect the lived experiences of marginalized students that are shaped by institutional culture, informal social hierarchies and interactions outside the classroom premises. Derogatory remarks, prejudices and unfamiliar support systems significantly influence students' experiences and emotional well-being. These aspects of exclusion play a critical role in determining the sustenance of individuals from marginalized identities within higher education spaces. In classrooms, ethno-cultural prejudices manifest through both implicit and explicit verbal and non-verbal behaviours, ranging from overt acts such as bullying and name-calling to subtler forms like stereotyping and structural exclusion (Brenick et al. 2019). While recent academic debates have increasingly acknowledged the importance of inclusivity, there still remains to be a requirement for meaningful change more than representational actions. This chapter attempts to examine the persistent disparities that continue to shape urban Indian higher education. It further mentions the need for reforming existing policies whilst addressing internalized disparities that produce both subtle and overt barriers within the educational premises. Lastly, it explores the possibilities for collective action and structural reform that move inclusion from a peripheral ideal to a lived reality.

Literature Review

Khadka et al. (2018) highlighted multiple narratives by scholars and faculty members from marginalized identities shaped by non-binary orientations, racial and ethnic minorities, mental health issues and disabilities, immigrants and financially disadvantaged communities. The narratives mention how socially dominant niches not only exist within university premises but also have a significant control over the larger community labelling other minorities as outsiders. Similarly, Heffernan (2023) argued that higher education institutions continued to privilege majority groups. While efforts have been made to increase marginalized intakes, navigating through the complexities of existent biases and rigid structures is still quite restrictive. Moreover, accessibility has not transformed equitable leadership roles and assigning permanent positions at this level of education. The study is analysed through Bourdieusian ways emphasizing that policy reform and social justice are integral to achieve absolute and functional inclusivity in the campus. McNamee et al. (2025) explored the structural barriers faced by rural students under the guise of expanding access to higher education. The study includes interviews conducted on eleven students who have emphasized on universities failing to develop equitable practices at the under graduate level. The study further argues on institutions to realize that only collective responsibility towards providing adequate facilities of inclusivity can help in actualizing integration.

Adejumo (2021) argued that diversity, inclusion, and belongingness had an interrelated yet complex association in the United States. According to the prevailing social order, Whites were considered the dominant group, whereas African Americans and other non-white ethnicities were placed toward the lower end of the social hierarchy. Consequently, this racial

hierarchy consistently obstructed social inclusion and the maintenance of equitable organizational climates. Veldhuis (2026) discussed the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ researchers who worked on issues concerning marginalized communities. These researchers often experienced discrimination, stigma, and the perception that their research was less objective or valuable compared with topics chosen by majority groups. This situation created a form of double marginalization in which both their identity and their research topics became sources of bias. Such prejudices often affected their career opportunities, well-being, and professional recognition.

Kim and Rhinehart (2026) examined how marginalized identities influenced mental health challenges among college students with psychological disorders. Using a national survey of 5,120 students, the study revealed that women, first-generation college students, and students with ADHD often experienced greater psychological difficulties. The study also showed that first-generation students were less likely to use campus mental health services. The findings therefore highlighted how intersecting identities intensified students' mental health struggles and shaped their willingness or ability to seek professional support. Leyton et al. (2026) explored how sexual orientation and gender identity influenced the experiences of STEM students in higher education. Using data from universities in India and the United Kingdom, the study found that students with marginalized identities often experienced stronger imposter feelings, including fear, self-doubt, and a sense of unworthiness. These students also reported lower well-being and a weaker sense of belonging. Zembylas (2025) discussed the decolonial era in higher education and proposed a framework that amalgamated the ideas of decolonialism and intersectionality to understand overlapping forms of oppression such as race, gender, and class.

By critically analysing existing divides, the study indicated the persistence of colonial structures of knowledge and power within universities. The article argued that addressing inequalities in academic spaces required recognition of diverse knowledge systems and lived experiences. It further highlighted how integrated approaches could eventually challenge biases and encourage more equitable academic practices. Sharma (2023) discussed achieving social inclusion through social policies that addressed social inequalities and disparities, promoted active participation, empowered social rights, and inhibited social problems. The paper further emphasized the contribution of governing policies in combating public concerns related to rights and entitlements, along with specific inclusive policies that supported social cohesion and eventually advanced toward a more inclusive society.

Access and Participation

In the recent years, higher education has placed marginalized students in varied educational realms that have contributed in building expansive avenues towards enrolment, accessibility and recognition. However, this form of participation is not equitably recognised by most institutions that provide opportunities via minority quotas, scholarships and social engagement programs. Students from suburban and rural localities often struggle to navigate through universities that implicitly endorse linguistic ease, polished patterns of interaction and certain forms of attire as well. Recent debates underscore mere exclusion, while disregarding the student experiences of those who failed at obtaining seats in in these apparent reputed and socially-affluent institutions (Tobbell et al. 2021).

Challenges in accessibility and participation of marginalized identities are as follows:

1. Cultural and Structural Control: Regular interactivity within the classroom premises intensifies the pre-existing divides with approaches settled within privileged cultures. Traditional and region-specific knowledge and belief systems remain to be labelled as idealized, inaccurate and redundant. Most colleges have multiple students led organizations but measurable representation from minorities is considerably lesser as compared to those who share colloquial codes.

2. Implicit conventions of social integration: Informal exchanges beyond classroom premises are limited to social standards and economic autonomy whilst maintaining illusive acceptance in formal settings. Even while attempting to fit in, marginalised students most likely gain occasional access to these social niches as the existing members are predominantly classified as elitist or conceited.

3. Resource Constraints: Active participation in a technologically driven education system is primarily dependent on digital access and financial security to provide for personal devices. With limited resources across living conditions, part time work such as agents in quick commerce platforms, marginalized students experience varied difficulties to sustain urban education. Institutional support is excessively required to accommodate such students and provide adequate resources to maintain conducive spaces for academia.

Effective accessibility and participation require institutional reform through culture specific modifications via cross- ethnic activities and peer support personnel that acknowledge the variance and make provisions of sustained inclusion. Notable institutions are required to take added measures since the

student population is overly variegated and ensure equitable representation that contributes in developing an inherent sense of belongingness both in and outside the premises.

Knowledge and Representation

Curricula in most Higher Education institutions are formulated by the affiliated Universities that unintentionally include works originated from dominant theories of knowledge. Theories produced by differentiating identities is oftentimes communicated as 'scholarly work by the socially oppressed' or collaborative initiatives as 'inclusive programs for the specially abled' while still segregating and categorising their writings and experiences as secondary and sympathetic. Recent discussions address the significance of belongingness but the intersectional or non-linear pattern of academic frameworks is often undervalued (Amisi et al. 2024). This disproportionate representation is left unnoticed and in rare circumstances added as a supplementary portion at the end of a chapter that otherwise endorses majority mindsets and language preferences.

Inadequacies in knowledge representation are further visible through the following dimensions:

1. **Prevalent norms of academic inquiry:** Certain dialectical writing styles and language preferences are viewed as alternative forms of expression rather than mainstreaming their competence or argumentative styles. This segregation is further divided while placing marginalized works in regular curricula.

2. **Discussions and Seminars:** Topics of generic discussion in classrooms initiated by the faculty, seldom consider to elucidate on any work from the marginalized communities even in the form of examples. Since queer rights have been

making headlines in the recent years, special lectures are being presented but struggles of Intersectionalities within this community or other minorities are simply neglected.

Compartmentalizing diversity and further segregating scholarly works that oppose dominant patterns is an existing complexity in appropriate representation of marginalised studies. To address this imbalance, institutions require to initiate a critical interrogation of the pre- existent hierarchies within disciplines and building pedagogies that recognize plurality as integral rather than supplementary. At the institutional level, faculty and administrators further need to reflect on their personal social perspectives and assumptions that potentially influences academic dialogue and practices in the classroom.

Institutional Culture and Climate

An institution's culture and climate are assessed as central to how inclusion actually functions rather than being trivial within the premises. Institutions often articulate commitments to equality through codes of conduct and grievance cells, but in the present-day equality alone is quite insufficient to accommodate diversity effectively. The lived realities of students are shaped to a much greater extent by the implicit norms that regulate belongingness. Culture functions through shared experiences regarding behaviour, speech, confidence and participation, while on the other hand, climate reflects how these expectations are perceived by those positioned differently within the naturally existent social structures. The question, therefore, is not how institutions are prohibiting discrimination, but consequently, how the students are categorising those who naturally belong and those who are trying to fit in.

From one perspective, institutional norm is necessary for maintaining rules around participation and discipline that advocate for inclusion as neutral and fair. However, these norms unintentionally reflect few dominant social values. Abilities such as fluency in English, confidence in communication as well as adaptability to varying technological systems are shaped by prior social advantage. These characteristics are commonly treated as markers of merit and skill, where students who are adept at meeting such expectations benefit while others try to constantly acclimatise. In a recent case study on diversity and acceptance, facilitators and members from 'hegemonic groups' are not only ill-informed about inclusivity but also deflect certain inquiries on minorities participants in highly exclusive classrooms (Gonzales et al. 2021). Marginalized students quite often if not regularly, encounter cultures endorsing homogeneity. For instance, queer communities face subtle threats to identity or open hostility despite the presence of pride cells, students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter silent exclusions in internships, expensive social outings outside the college premises or even restrictive assumptions over "exposure". Learners with disabilities are structurally marginalised thereby, experiencing a greater amount of emotional and social isolation.

Informal spaces such as peer groups, study circles, mentorships and hostel life are typically viewed as community building networks. Yet these spaces can further create divides via varying castes, classes, gender and sexual orientations, disabilities, religions and social hierarchies. Exclusion is seldom overt as it operates through selective inclusion and common social codes that signal who would "belong." Recent research shows that women in academia confront greater precarity while navigating 'hostile climates' and 'inner circles'

that persist in socially gatekeeping and undermining their capabilities (Welde and Stepnick, 2023). The potential for campuses to question dominant norms remains limited since such efforts are to be formally supported rather than being veiled into other norms. As a result, a visible gap between expressions of inclusion and habitual practices continue to create inequitable participation.

Intersectionality and Academic experiences

Intersectionality is considered as an integral component confined within marginalization which is perceived and experienced under multiple classifications. Students enter universities with varied social identities based on caste, class, gender, disability, religion, region, language and financial background. These identities intersect to shape one's academic journey in a multilayered and almost contradictory form as well. When inequality is viewed through a singular lens, it conveniently overlooks other lived realities. For instance, two women students may confront gender bias in the premise, but a first-generation rural Dalit student simultaneously navigates financial uncertainty, linguistic barriers and limited familiarity with the surroundings. Overlapping structures of this kind do not define one another but, exchange distinct forms of inclusivity and exclusivity.

Students from urban households have certain preferences while interacting in diverse classrooms and eventually develop a niche of their own. However, those who are ' left out' in this disparate environment develop smaller collectives that assist in tolerating cultural shocks and strengthen local bonds, popularly termed as a type of 'trauma bonding' in the present times. Operating inclusivity in lived realities is exceedingly complicated as compared to norms representing multiculturalism. Students

belonging from more privileged backgrounds within the reserved categories specifically those with access to urban schooling or proficiency in English, find it easier to fit into mainstream academic expectations than those from rural or less fortunate backgrounds. On the other hand, a disabled student from a low-income family may need financial help and specialized teaching personnel. Intersecting issues of this kind are considered too trivial primarily because these are not 'common' problems for the majority. Consequently, policies that focus on just one aspect usually fail to notice the multidimensional form of the existent and internalized prejudices. Intersectionality examined within real academic spaces, reveal how power often operates through indistinct forms that may appear neutral superficially but, in real time privileges dominant ways of speaking, writing and presenting oneself. Higher education institutions unknowingly endorse these characteristics as markers of competence and greater potential.

Inclusionary strategies and policies vary for different intersections in the larger social structure. A suggestive framework was designed to integrate multicultural strategies and Intersectionalities by the Council of Europe in 2021 addressing to view inclusion as a 'resource' rather than a means for neutralising social inequalities (Aksezer et al. 2023). Subsequently, in the Indian context a study on the lived experiences of students from Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu suggests, 'social capital' being paramount in contributing to holistic well-being and community engagement while navigating through Intersectionalities and inclusion (Das and Lalitha, 2023). Norms and regulations need to be utilitarian instead of being transformational on paper at this point. Students positioned at multiple marginalized intersections feel intimidated by added scrutiny and expectations of

being the sole representative of their community. Recurrent experiences shape one's confidence and overall academic performance. However, this multidimensional structuring does not effectively emphasise on disadvantage, it draws attention to adaptability, shared solidarities and the alternative ways of contributing to academic spaces. Additionally, intersectionality and varying educational experiences comprehend inequality and prioritise a moral responsibility for institutions. It entitles reflective teaching practices, interconnected policies and a differing concept of merit that acknowledges complexity instead of singular categories.

Affective inequalities and Support systems

All learners irrespective of any identity manoeuvre higher education whilst facing considerable amounts of difficulties that distort one's emotional well-being and stability. With a variegating system of education and multilayered structural changes, marginalized identities struggle exceedingly to manage daily apprehensiveness and anxiety while aiming to achieve considerable grades. An additional issue that marginalized identities face is a difference in the grades that they acquire in both formative and summative formats. Students that completed schooling from suburban or rural regions observe a significant variance in marking patterns of urban higher education. Despite their diligence. meritorious students often struggle to produce recognizable efforts that are equally accepted and appreciated like other classmates, developing uncertainty and chronic stress thereafter. This disparity tends to go unacknowledged and existing structural disadvantages continue to persist. The various expectations from students at this level are in actuality, largely socially constructed and not solely individualised.

Emotional and psychological inequalities for marginalized identities appear in the following ways:

1. Self-doubt and inadequacy: Interactions revolving around 'insider and outsider' peer groups. commonly known as imposter syndrome. Students often question their sense of belongingness in academic spaces that are shaped by dominant linguistic and cultural norms.

2. Burden of prejudice: Constant need for students to prove competence and appropriately represent their entire community.

3. Lack of relatable mentors: This intensifies feelings of isolation and limits informal academic guidance.

4. Implicit biases: Subtle exclusion in classroom and peer interactions that gradually weaken confidence and participation.

A study on group-based trajectories of 14,215 individuals showed a consistent hike in mental health problems faced by 52.8% of females and 0.6% of non-binary students as well as lowered levels of safety and contentment (Lereya et al. 2024). Presently, visualising idealistic or absolute inclusivity is utopian, but constructive reforms for holistic development and sensitivity for all students is required to attain functionality of norms. Faculty and support systems should be exceedingly attentive towards the behaviour of internalised peer groups that actually initiate discrimination implicitly even within monitored classroom premises. Understanding micro issues of exclusion is necessary to combat what is typically unattended while dealing with students greatly influenced by social media inaccuracies and mental health misconceptions.

Solidarity and Transformational possibilities

Higher education in India demands an increased commitment towards equity and shared belongingness while also defining frameworks for fundamental transformation. Authorities should ensure regular practices that foster participation and fairness as a shared responsibility for all the members in the institution. Despite institutions projecting images of acceptance, marginalized students continue to encounter subtle forms of exclusion and norms directed for adopting dominant academic cultures. Accessibility and isolation coexist in the same educational premise thereby, exposing a significant gap between visibility and meaningful participation. An intentional and functional policy reform is essential to incorporate both the existent positive components as well as develop new and adaptive systems of equitable harmony.

Strategies in transforming symbolic inclusivity to true inclusion are as follows:

1. **Reframing recognition:** While merit and competence are correlated with linguistic ease and urban cultural symbolism, equality alone does not allow power to transform discrimination any longer. Building sustainable norms through practical possibilities will eventually develop fairness and bridge the gap towards accepting plurality.

2. **Fostering true acceptance:** Developing orientation programs that focus on recognizing deficiencies in first generation learners is integral to expand the limits of actual inclusivity. Moreover, acknowledging their unique variance and designing cross cultural and cross ethnic activities fosters sensitivity and awareness amongst the students.

3. Prioritizing sensitized teaching and learning: Using unbiased terminologies and socially sensitised examples while teaching as well as patiently attending to problems faced by students from marginalized identities can build an environment that is adaptive and accepting. A specialised learner-centric pedagogy is required to dismantle the existing prejudices while forming a place for functional social awareness among the educators (Christodoulidi, 2024).

4. Strengthening the community: Mentorship programs, peer interactive circles and committees dedicated to resist any misconduct against diverse learners should be mainstreamed to promote shared responsibility and intergroup collaborations. Regular assessments and monitoring performance enhances transparency and ensures that commitments to inclusion are sustained.



Figure 1. Strategies for Transforming Symbolic Inclusivity to True Inclusion

These transformations are primarily essential for the present generation that is sensitive to questions on diverse identities, justice and mental well-being. The present learners do not perceive educational institutions from a limited viewpoint but in turn consider it as space where values of equality, dialogue and representation are actively negotiated by all

members. If institutions fail to endorse authentic inclusivity, they risk distancing an entire generation from coherence between principle and practice. Channelling equity, meaningful participation and collaborative engagements into formal norms within higher education is not to be considered optional any longer since it is essential for shaping socially responsible students who can understand and challenge inequality in the world around them.

Conclusion

Inclusivity of marginalized identities in higher education cannot be solely recognized through expanded access or tokenistic presence of diversity within institutions. This chapter attempted to highlight inclusion from a grounded perspective where symbolic representation does not immediately transform the internalised structures that shape participation, recognition, and belongingness. Prejudices persist through subtle practices embedded within knowledge systems, institutional cultures and everyday social interactivity. Institutional norms that superficially appear to endorse acceptance, often reflect historically dominant standards of language, behaviour and intellectual expression permitting inequality to surface even in formally monitored environments.

Equitable access and targeted support for students managing Intersectionalities is to be actualised through formal policy reform. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises on socio-economically disadvantaged groups and intends to allocate funds specifically for gender inclusion, special education and bridge courses (Tripathi and Yadav, 2023). Developing in-house initiatives such as affinity groups recognises the difficulties learners are succumbing to in real classrooms and penalising acts of polarisation.

Teaching personnel should recognise 'invisible labour' that marginalised students provide in order to attain similar proficiencies like that of their other peers. Personalised instruction and programmes associated with Universal Learning Design is essential to ensure basic inclusion for first generation learners as well as learners with disabilities.

Addressing disparities in actual inclusion requires moving beyond recognition of diversity and transition to sustained structural transformation. Educational organizations require to launch or redesign frameworks on social pluralism while also addressing the misconceptions around potentialities bound to one's region, religion, caste, class, gender, orientations or socio-economic background. Solidarity and support groups are to be mandated in policy not just as a symbolic duty but also to achieve inclusivity through a sense of shared responsibility. Developing and restructuring the existent norms into more fluid systems of acceptance and cooperation possesses the power to transform the present position of marginalization in Indian higher education.

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Intersecting Margins: Literary Narratives of Multidimensional Identity and Marginalisation

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Abstract

This chapter explores how contemporary literature represents intersectional identities with the use of innovative narrative strategies. It argues that narrative form itself can create intersectionality and thus make complex, layered experiences accessible to the reader by moving beyond traditional analyses that view marginalised identities as separate categories. The study focuses on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987/ 2004), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands /La Frontera* (1987/ 2012), and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) as they offer distinct yet convergent literary articulations of multidimensional identity, enabling a comparative exploration of how race, gender, language, memory, and migration intersect to produce varied but structurally connected experiences of marginalisation. It examines how narrative techniques like fragmented and dual perspective narration, non-linear temporality and linguistic hybridity reflect the multi-dimensionality of marginalisation. *Beloved*'s fragmented voices and temporal disjunctions show how race, gender and historical trauma interact; the use of dual perspective narration and diasporic temporality in *The Namesake* presents generations of cultural dislocation; and the use of linguistic hybridity and genre-blending in *Borderlands* presents Chicana queer border identities. With

the use of theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, trauma theory, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism, the study demonstrate how narrative form can function as a site for expressing intersectionality; thus creating an interdisciplinary framework that combines literary analysis with critical theories about identity and social marginalisation. In conclusion, the study contends that literature does more than simply portray marginalisation; it acts as a performance of the very complexity of those who live at the intersection of many overlapping social forces (Crenshaw, 1989).

Keywords: *intersectional identity, narrative strategy, marginalisation, non-linear temporality, linguistic hybridity*

Introduction

Literature has, over the years, provided a reflection of the disparities and inequalities in society, as well as an understanding of people living on the margins. Traditionally, however, studies usually viewed individuals belonging to marginalised communities (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality etc.) through discrete categories, without noting how all of these identities intersect and provide meaning to each other through lived experience. The historical oppression faced by a Black woman cannot be reduced solely to race or gender, because it is produced at the intersection of these social constructs. Similar is the case of people from the diaspora and linguistic minorities who experience an overlap of various powers and constraints acting upon their existence.

This study analyses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987/2004), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987/2012) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) to examine how formal strategies (i.e., fragmentation, multiple perspectives, non-linear time, linguistically hybrid text and

others) highlight the complexity of life lived at multiple margins. In *Beloved*, fragmented and ghost-like voices convey the psychological and historical trauma that Black women experienced following slavery. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa constructs the complex identities of queer Chicana border dwellers by using code-switching and blending of genres. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri conveys the complexities related to the displacement of people from one culture to another through her use of dual perspective and temporal framing to present her characters' experiences. Their narrative forms serve as a place where marginalised individuals express their unique experiences highlighting their intersecting marginalities. Using the theory of intersectionality, this study demonstrates how authors use narrative strategies to create multilayered, interconnected representations of marginality.

Beyond Single-Axis Identity

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) idea of intersectionality looks at how multiple power systems are interrelated to create the identities of individuals (or groups) instead of viewing systems of power in isolation. To her, Black women aren't just Black or women; their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of racism and sexism (139-40). This challenges "single-axis frameworks," which assume that an individual category describes a person's identity while ignoring how social hierarchies are constructed together (Crenshaw, 1989, 140). Traditional scholars often focus on race as the basis for interpreting the work of Black authors or writers classified as "marginalised." Alternatively, many feminist scholars pay attention only to the gendered nature of literary texts, without addressing how the experience of racialisation or immigration has shaped the author's voice or representation. As stated by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) the interdependent and mutually-constructing systems of oppression create an overall model of domination (225).

This chapter looks at how these intersections are represented through different narrative forms, each using literary devices to convey the experience of intersectionality: fragmented narrative order, non-linear temporality, shifting focalisation, polyvocality, and hybrid language. These devices enable readers to understand that characters have overlapping experiences of living in multiple power structures simultaneously. Thus, narrative form helps readers understand the multiple ways identity is formed (i.e. as relational/ as unstable/ as historical). By disrupting linear time and using two or more conflicting accounts in order to create a single story, writers establish tension and negotiation as an inherent part of living along multiple intersections of identity. In *Beloved*, this intersection is made up of different aspects of identity—being Black, being a woman, and the after-effects of slavery. By using fragmented narrative structure and multiple perspectives, Morrison depicts a fragmented psychological state, resulting from experiencing a traumatic past. In "The Site of Memory," Morrison (1995) states that though writers often "drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate" (90) her purpose is to "rip that veil" (91), through the use of fragmentation and non-linear time. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa generates an alternate form of writing and dialects (English, Spanish and Chicano) to blend autobiography, poetry, history, and theory (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012) and perceive an identity based on contradictions (*mestiza* consciousness) (77). In *The Namesake*, diasporic identity is formed by the interrelating forces of migration, ethnicity, understanding generational differences, and class mobility. The use of oscillating climes between India and America, and from parental to child viewpoints create a site-specific realisation of the divided consciousness of an immigrant's identity (Lahiri, 2003, 48–49).

The diversity in primary texts show how intersectionality works transnationally and cross-culturally while reaffirming that multi-dimensional oppression is both unique and not shared equally between cultures, thus presenting ways to view forms of writing differently. The study thus outlines three different narrative techniques: fragmentation and haunting in *Beloved*; hybrid language and generic disruption in *Borderlands/La Frontera*; and dual perspective and diasporic temporality in *The Namesake*.

Crenshaw (1989) argues that discrimination is experienced based on one's race and gender. Therefore, intersectionality challenges "single-axis frameworks" that don't account for multiple identities, the way structural oppression creates variety within an individual's identity, and the nature of social hierarchies themselves. Collins (2000) extends this idea to include oppression through a "matrix of domination," where all aspects of oppression (race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) interact and create power in society. Intersectionality demonstrates that one's lived experiences are affected by multiple factors at once and through the relationships of those experiences.

Narrative Form as a Site of Intersectional Expression

This study posits that narrative form is an epistemological tool—the way a story is presented has an impact on how the reader understands knowledge around identity, history, and power. Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma as being non-linear and returning through fragmented pieces, repetitions, and disjointed time (4). Dominick LaCapra (2001) differentiates between a completed story and the continuation of working through a traumatic event, with the disruption of time representing unresolved violent actions in the past. Therefore, both fragmentation and non-linearity do

not exist as merely an authorial style, but rather represent the formal depiction of a historical event that has occurred.

Theories on diaspora and postcolonialism demonstrate that the narrative strategies used to mediate identity can be quite elaborate and complicated. Stuart Hall (1990) describes cultural identity as something that is constantly at work, rather than being a static entity, and there is no single correct version of it because of historical breaks (225). Similarly, Avtar Brah (1996) describes the diaspora as a set of interconnected relationships and spaces where different forms of time and place meet. The result of these spaces is often that the same situation can be recounted in two or more ways (dual perspectives) and/or the same situation may be interpreted differently at different times due to changes in the meaning of what was previously agreed upon in a particular situation (temporal fluctuations). These two strategies resist teleological narrations of assimilation/ return and instead reflect the contradictory, multiple characteristics of diasporic subjectivities. Post-colonialism and borderlands theory point to the conceptual importance of hybridisation when it comes to language. According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), it is through the in-between places of speech (2) that cultural meaning is created through hybridisation and this is manifested in the subversion of dominant norms and values. Anzaldúa (1987/2012) posits that *mestiza* consciousness is a way of living in contradiction based on the hybridisation of language and culture (78). As such, both code-switching and genre-blending serve not only as means to convey information, but to undermine established hierarchies of language and question the authoritative nature of monologic discourse. Thus, the hybridisation of narrative serves to theorise identity itself.

The theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, trauma theory, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism all have in common the premise that narrative structure mediates the ways social knowledge is created. Typically, linear and unified forms of narrative assume there is some kind of coherent subjectivity, or linear historical progression; however, fragmented, polyvocal, and/or hybrid forms of narrative demonstrate an alternate way to carry the narrative/message forward by depicting the simultaneity of different systems of power creating tension and ambiguity between the characters' lives. This study highlights the performativity of intersectionality in narrative form through a focus on the use of fragmentation and haunting in Morrison's *Beloved*, dual perspectives and diasporic temporality in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and code-switching and hybrid genres in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Fragmented Voices, Layered Lives: Trauma and Multiplicity in *Beloved*

Situated in the historical aftermath of American slavery, *Beloved* (1987/2004) resists the conventions of linear historical narrative, with Sethe's story unfolding not as a coherent autobiography but as a fractured assemblage of voices, temporal disruptions, and spectral presences. Rather than seeing emancipation as resolution, Morrison speaks of "rememory," the persistent return of traumatic history into the present (Morrison, 1987/2004, 49). These formal strategies highlight intersectional dimensions of Black womanhood in post-slavery America, where race, gender, motherhood, and historical trauma come together in inseparable ways.

Sethe's trauma of brutally killing her infant daughter rather than allowing her to be returned to slavery cannot be judged in isolation without understanding the structural

violence of chattel slavery. Morrison refuses to isolate maternal guilt as an individual psychological condition and situates it within the racialised and gendered dehumanisation of enslavement. Spillers (1987) argues that the institution of slavery led to the "ungendering" of the Black female body, rendering Black women simultaneously racialised, commodified, and sexually violated (67). Sethe's scarred back, described as a "chokecherry tree" (Morrison, 1987/2004, 7), becomes a living site of this intersecting brutality. Morrison's narrative structure mirrors the multiplicity of her identity (mother, formerly enslaved woman, fugitive, and survivor) as layered and inseparable by rejecting singular perspective and chronological constancy.

Beloved's fragmented narration shifts among Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and eventually the ghost Beloved. These shifting focalisations not just provide multiple viewpoints, they highlight how subjectivity fractures under trauma. Often blurring the boundary between personal memory and collective history: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay" (17) Sethe's reflections represent not just individual recollection but the enduring presence of slavery's violence within communal consciousness. Illustrating the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Hirsch, 1997), Denver's perspective, i.e., her isolation and fear which are shaped by both her mother's act and the community's withdrawal, show how historical oppression reproduces marginalisation across generations.

Beloved's own voice intensifies this fragmentation with her monologues, often syntactically disjointed and minimally punctuated, dissolve the boundaries between individual and ancestral memory: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, 1987/2004, 105). This evokes both infant consciousness and the collective trauma of the Middle

Passage, suggesting that Beloved is more than a single lost child— she represents "Sixty Million and more" **Africans who died** because of the **transatlantic slave trade** through capture, the Middle Passage, enslavement, and its brutal legacy (Morrison, 1987/2004). Avery F. Gordon (2008) conceptualises haunting as the return of repressed social violence that structures the present (8). In this sense, Beloved functions as a spectral manifestation of unresolved historical trauma, and literalises the persistence of slavery's afterlife within Black female subjectivity.

The recursive unfolding of the narrative around crucial places and events like Sweet Home, the escape, the infanticide, through flashbacks and partial revelations highlight the intersectional representation with its non-linear temporality. This reflects the psychic nature of trauma which resists direct narration and instead returns belatedly in fragmented form as Caruth states (1996, 4). Until well into the novel, Morrison withholds the full account of Sethe's act, allowing readers to experience the disorientation that characterises traumatic memory. Temporal disruption works both on theme and form, aligning readers' experience with the fractured temporality of trauma survivors.

The novel challenges the linear historical narrative that sees emancipation as closure. For formerly enslaved individuals, freedom does not erase structural or psychic oppression, as depicted by Baby Suggs. A powerful spiritual leader in her prime, Suggs ultimately stopped preaching and singing, portraying her marginalisation by fading into silence. Signalling exhaustion and disillusionment, her silence underscores the limits of intersecting racial terror and communal silence. Voice and silence in *Beloved* work as political measures: what can be spoken and what remains unspeakable show systemic constraints. Sethe's reluctance

to speak out about the infanticide, referring only to "what I did" (Morrison, 1987/2004, 91) shows the limits of language on facing extreme violence. Silence here denotes shame as well as the impossibility of proper representation. Similarly, the neighbours' failure to warn Sethe of approaching slave catchers reveals the internal fragmentation caused by oppression. Resisting reductive moral judgment, Morrison's polyphonic narrative allows these tensions to coexist without any resolution.

The fragmentation in *Beloved*'s narrative form is not just aesthetic but also a structural necessity. The use of multiple narrators, spectral disruptions, and absence of chronology show the lived reality of intersecting race, gender, and historical trauma. The recurring line "It was not a story to pass on" (137) shows how traumatic memory disrupts linear storytelling and resists conventional narrative closure, aligning form with the remnants of an oppressed past. Sethe's declaration "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine," (100) encapsulates both maternal attachment and the hauntingly traumatic legacy of slavery, while formulating identity not as stable but as contested and fragmented. Paul D's insistence "You your own best thing, Sethe. You are" (136) reflects a moment of self-assurance after being dehumanised for years. Narratively, Morrison uses such lines to foreground individual identity reclamation amid intersecting oppressions. Since the forces shaping her life overlap and are destabilising by nature, Sethe's experience cannot be contained within a linear, unified narrative.

Linguistic Hybridity and Border Crossings: Queer Chicana Identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987/2012), is situated at the U.S.–Mexico border as Anzaldúa writes as

a Chicana lesbian intellectual. She theorises that identity is defined through many separate crossings (i.e., geographical, linguistic, cultural, racial, and sexual). The "borderlands" are more than just physical areas, they are also a psychic and social space that exists through contradiction and negotiation. As a queer Chicana subject, Anzaldúa records her experience of marginalisation from a variety of intersecting identities based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language and/or nation. Her text demonstrates her multi-layered identity and positionality through hybrid use of language, multi-genre and non-linear style of writing.

Central to Anzaldúa's project is the concept of the "*mestiza* consciousness," a mode of awareness forged through inhabiting multiple, often conflicting identities (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, 77). Such consciousness contends against binary conceptions about the world (self/other, Mexican/American) thereby celebrating ambiguity and contradiction. Anzaldúa experiences oppression of racism, sexism, homophobia, and linguistic marginalisation all at once. She employs multiple formal strategies, including code-switching among English, Spanish, and Chicano Spanish, and refuses to translate many Spanish-language passages, thereby disrupting monolingual expectations and challenging the presumption of a linguistic hierarchy that privileges standard English. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, wherein meaning emerges in the "in-between" spaces of cultural enunciation (2). Swiftly navigating languages, Anzaldúa resists the dominance of standardised English and supports Chicano Spanish as a legitimate expressive medium. Language thus is a site of struggle and affirmation: "So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language" (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, 59). Linguistic hybridity thus performs the liminality of border identity, enacting rather than merely describing cultural

in-betweenness. The bilingual aspect of this narrative is also indicative of the internalised linguistic oppression that Anzaldúa describes; Chicano Spanish, frequently associated with improper or wrong use of language, serves as a signifier of the social marginalisation of this group. By using multiple dialects and speech patterns in her narrative, Anzaldúa challenges the authority of standardised discourse.

Genre hybridity contributes to this intersectional articulation by fusing autobiography, history, cultural theory, and poetry within one text. This further breaks down the borders that have historically been used to create distinction between disciplines. Just as Anzaldúa rejects being described as belonging to one specific sexual or cultural identity, she also describes *Borderlands* as unable to fit into any one of these genres. Embodied or personal experiences provide a means of knowing and understanding, which challenges the tradition of knowing through separation or detachment from one's experience (objective or scientific). Such an approach resonates with feminist epistemology, which foregrounds situated knowledge and embodied subjectivity (Collins, 2000). Using a series of non-linear narrative structures is yet another way she formally enacts intersectional identities through her writing. Rather than presenting a chronological life story, Anzaldúa works through memories, myths, cultural analysis, and spiritual reflection. The borderlands are presented as cyclical, recursive, and layered; past and present, indigenous history and contemporary politics coexist within the same textual moment. This disruption of time is reflective of trauma theory's observation that cultures have been marginalised through time many times over, thus rendering their histories non-linear in nature (Caruth, 1996). For Anzaldúa, however, fragmentation can represent the creative potential of the development of a new consciousness, formed in the midst of

contradictions. Ultimately, the formal strategies of *Borderlands/La Frontera*—code-switching, genre hybridity, and non-linear structure—embody the multidimensional marginalisation of queer Chicana identity. Language enacts cultural and racial liminality; genre-blending mirrors the refusal of categorical containment; fragmented temporality reflects both historical dispossession and creative reconstitution. Through these formal devices employed by Anzaldúa, she illustrates that identity at the border is not something that exists or is created once and for all but something that continues to exist through ongoing negotiations among multiple overlapping axes of power.

Anzaldúa's assertion that the border "*es una herida abierta…*" (is an open wound) fuses geography with cultural conflict, articulating the pain of living at multiple margins. It uses metaphor and spatial imagery to convey cultural, racial, and geopolitical marginalisation: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Anzaldúa envisions identity not as inherited but as actively constructed across intersecting cultures: "So, don't give me your tenets and your laws… making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber…" (22). Her declaration that she must "stand and claim my space" to build "*una cultura mestiza*" emphasises the active formation of identity at the crossroads of cultures and power. When she insists "Until I am free to write bilingually… my tongue will be illegitimate" (59) she cannot accept herself, and ties the politics of language directly to the politics of intersectional identity. By explicitly linking language, identity, and legitimacy, she foregrounds how narrative (and self-expression) is shaped by intersecting cultural norms.

Displacement, Duality, and Diaspora: Negotiating Generational Margins in *The Namesake*

Exploring the Bengali-American immigrant experience through the generational tensions between Ashoke Ganguli and his son Gogol, *The Namesake* (2003) explores how identity becomes created at the intersection of cultural migration, generational differences, and race from an overall genealogical perspective. Instead of showing assimilation as a simple, one-way process, Lahiri uses shifting points of view and changes in time to reflect the instability of diasporic identity, establishing that immigrant identity is constantly shaped and reshaped in different ways.

At the centre of the novel is the struggle between Ashoke, who reminisces constantly about past events in India and uses language and cultural rhythms from his homeland while starting anew in Massachusetts; and his son Gogol, who feels ashamed of being from Bangladesh, of inheriting a name that has no cultural relevance to either American or Bengali culture, and growing up in a prejudicial environment. Ashoke's relationship with memory, language, and culture in the context of his origins has helped shape how Gogol views himself – both through legacy and as a burden – by representing his discomfort with his hyphenated identity through his unusual name, which has, like his identity, no real place within either society. This generational conflict reflects what Hall (1990) describes as the diasporic condition of "being" and "becoming" (225), in which identity is shaped by both historical continuity and present dislocation.

Lahiri's dual perspectives reflect how both cultures exist simultaneously. Within the text, the reader often observes the thoughts and feelings of Gogol; however, there is also access to the interior world of his parents Ashoke and Ashima.

This switching back and forth within the story structure does not allow the reader to prioritise either Ashoke and Ashima's cultural experience over that of Gogol's. Feeling isolated after moving from Calcutta to America, Ashima's isolation is due to her inability to speak both English and Bengali well, and because of being separated from her family (Lahiri, 2003). Lahiri's observation "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49) conveys the endurance of immigrant identity, where cultural displacement becomes persistent rather than temporary. This metaphor highlights an immigrant's experience of marginality as ongoing, unsettled, and bodily, reflecting how identity feels in a diasporic setting.

In addition, Gogol's experience of being called by the nickname of his father constantly reminds him that he has different cultural identities (American and Indian) and he struggles with this cultural divide. He changes his name legally to Nikhil to create an identity for himself separate from his father's culture. The relationship between Gogol's culture based on his parents' experience and his desire for a different type of identity creates tension between the homeland and hostland as well as the tension between traditional identity and self-defined identity. Instead of transcending the generational gap, Lahiri creates a space in the text where the experiences of both characters can exist. The resultant dual focalisation of the text parallels the interconnectedness seen in diaspora theory and demonstrates that one's identity is created through the negotiation of cultural experiences rather than the replacement of one culture with another (Brah, 1996). Through shifting perspectives, Lahiri defies any single-axis model of an immigrant's identity. Gogol's struggle comes from a combination of generational and cultural events,

which is captured by the narrative form. Temporal structures underline diasporic duality with the novel covering the decades, alternating between Ashoke's recollections of his almost deadly train accident in India and Gogol's present-day experiences in the United States. This back-and-forth from the past to the present lends diasporic temporality, where different times exist together. Ashoke's journey from India to North America was prompted by the influence of Goggle the writer and their experiences living with family in India after the accident. This pivotal moment in the past affects Ashoke's son and how he shapes his life in America through a different set of cultural and familial values.

Gogol understands temporality in a different manner—his sense of self is oriented toward the future (romantic relationships, career aspirations, and self-definition independent of his parents). At the same time, however, his pursuit of a future is often impeded by the obligations of immediate family and the influence of the cultural memory of the families from whom they come from. The repeated returns to these various forms of reflection create a sense of continuity between the present and the past. An assimilationist narrative of immigration, which is usually seen as a clean break with the past, is not supported by Lahiri's non-linear development.

Using naming as a narrative device to explore identity fluidity and cultural negotiation in diasporic life, Lahiri highlights how personal identity is reconfigured amid intersecting pressures of heritage and assimilation: "Nikhil. It wasn't the name he was *born with*" (243). The evocative question "How many times does a person write his name in a lifetime—a million? Two million?" (98) presents Lahiri's use of naming as a motif for navigating selfhood in a space that is culturally liminal, thereby highlighting the repetitive/ritualistic nature of identity affirmation through naming. Situated at different intersections of identity and heritage

(Russian literature vs. Bengali culture, American culture vs. Indian culture), Gogol attempts to align himself with cultural norms in America by taking on the name "Nikhil." However, when he learns the history of his name after the death of his father Ashoke, the meaning of his name changes. The story of his name becomes an intersectional space for love from his father, history of migration, and literary memories, implying that one's identity formation is not possible in isolation from interconnected narratives.

Ultimately, *The Namesake* demonstrates that the immigrant experience is not reducible to cultural difference alone. Shaped by generational expectation, racial positioning, linguistic negotiation, and historical contingency, Lahiri's narrative strategies like dual perspectives, temporal oscillation, and symbolic naming facilitate this complexity. She enacts the multidimensionality of diasporic life by structuring the novel around relational subjectivities rather than singular consciousness. In doing so, the narrative form itself becomes a vehicle for representing intersectional marginalisation. Neither fixed nor unified, identity in *The Namesake* is produced through displacement, duality, and the ongoing negotiation of generational margins.

Form as Intersectional Praxis: Narrative Strategies for the Margins

The narratives studied above show that identities based on race, gender, migration and historical trauma cannot be adequately represented through single, linear forms of representation. Morrison uses fragmentation and polyvocality in *Beloved* to show how slavery has created psychic/historically-based divisions in identity for black women. The use of recursive time, different narrative voices and perspectives, and the experiential disintegration of time

and place compels readers to reckon with the continued existence of racialised and/or gendered violence (Morrison, 1987/2004).

Anzaldúa's radical formal experimentation in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987/2012) involving code-switching between the English and Spanish languages helps challenge mono-lingual authority, thus validating the vernacular of the borderland. Occupying multiple margins through her identity as a queer Chicana subject, Anzaldúa's writing embodies intersectionality not only through the content but also the structure of her narrative, whereby she refuses to represent any of her marginal identities through a singular voice, in a stable genre, or in a linear timeline. By declaring that the border is an open wound, she uses spatial metaphor to render geographic marginality palpable, fusing identity and place in a single evocative image.

The Namesake's narrative structure uses dual focalisation and diasporic time to show how generations of immigrants deal with marginality. The use of Gogol and his parents' thoughts shows that identity is created through relationships, not through individuals alone (Lahiri, 2003). Temporal layering and perspective shifts in the narrative structure show the intersection of culture, generational expectations and racial positioning. Rejecting assimilationist teleology, the narrative structure emphasises the instability and multiplicity of diasporic subjectivity. Lahiri's observation that "being a foreigner… is a sort of lifelong pregnancy" (49) frames immigrant experience not as an ongoing phase but as a persistent condition, placing identity at the crossroads of culture, place, and belonging.

These texts present literature as a place where marginalised identities are represented and built into the

structure of the narrative. Crenshaw (1989) describes how systems of power are overlapping—together they create connection and this kind of relational logic when translated into a narrative practice appears as a polyphonic voice or voice of confusion, hybridity and disruption of time. This perspective has interdisciplinary implications related to the integration of literary criticism and critical race theory, gender studies, diaspora studies and post-colonial studies to show how valuable is the dialogue among disciplines. Fragmented narratives and code switching are not only examples of aesthetic devices, but they also intervene in larger debates related to representation, power, and the creation of knowledge. The texts in study drive home a point: literature today not only gives voice to those who have been silenced, but also modifies narrative structure to reflect identities shaped at the intersections of race, gender, migration, sexual identity and history. By modifying form, Morrison, Lahiri, and Anzaldúa show that intersectionality is both theory of identity and a practice of narrative, one characterised by multiplicity, relationality, and structural transformation.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the lived experience of marginalisation does not occur along one axis, but rather emerges from the interaction of a variety of identity markers. Morrison's fragmented and multi-voiced narrative captures the intersections of race, gender, and historical trauma in the aftermath of slavery in a way that creates a way to remember events rather than follow a linear pattern. Lahiri's concise writing style, use of dual perspectives, and non-linear time structure exemplify the experience of diasporic identities, the experience being one of constant renegotiation between different generations and cultures. Anzaldúa's experimental blending of genres and code-switching challenge the

conventions of traditional literature and redefine language as tool for resistance and self-definition.

The focus on form as an intersectional practice furthers discussions across disciplines regarding marginalised identity and experience in literary texts. Attention to method is equally as important as attention to content/ representation of identities. Literature is thus conceived of as both a representation for marginalised individuals and a site for the multiple complexities associated with living at the intersections of marginalisation to be performed, challenged, and redefined.

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From the Palace to the Portal: Institutional Activism and the Politics of Marginalised Identities in the FUTURA Cycle

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of institutional communication at Argentina's Palacio Nacional de las Artes during the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of institutional activism centred on marginalised identities. Drawing on a qualitative case study of the FUTURA digital cycle, the analysis considers social media posts, live-streamed events and official documents in order to explore how the museum reconfigured its regimes of visibility, mediation and legitimacy. The findings suggest that digital communication operated as a site of symbolic dispute in which historically marginalised bodies and subjectivities gained renewed conditions of appearance within a national cultural institution. Rather than functioning merely as an outreach strategy, the FUTURA cycle enabled the museum to experiment with non-conventional forms of cultural activism, reshaping its modes of public address and renegotiating the boundaries between institutional authority and dissident cultural production.

Keywords: *Marginalised identities; Institutional activism; Cultural policy; Regimes of visibility; Digital mediation; Museums during COVID-19*

1. Introduction: Crisis, Institutions and Marginalised Identities

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a critical event that forced cultural institutions worldwide to reorganise their forms of public presence. For museums and art spaces, prolonged closures did not merely represent an operational interruption but a profound transformation in the conditions of enunciation through which they address audiences and regulate cultural visibility. As physical access to exhibition spaces was suspended, institutional communication ceased to function as a secondary tool of dissemination and became instead the primary arena in which legitimacy, authority and public relevance were negotiated. In this sense, the pandemic can be understood not only as a health crisis but as a reconfiguration of regimes of visibility: a disruption that displaced the spatial authority of the museum and exposed the fragility of its symbolic order.

Museums have long been analysed as dispositifs that organise bodies, objects and narratives within specific regimes of knowledge and power. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (2002) conceptualisation of the dispositif and Tony Bennett's (1995) analysis of the museum as an instrument of civic pedagogy, the institution may be understood as a technology that produces publics while regulating what can be seen, said and recognised. The museum does not simply exhibit artefacts; it structures the conditions under which subjects appear within the public sphere. Its authority rests not only on collections or heritage but on its capacity to stabilise hierarchies of cultural value and to legitimise certain bodies, memories and aesthetics over others.

Within this framework, the politics of marginalised identities becomes inseparable from institutional communication. Feminist, queer and transfeminist critiques have demonstrated that representation is embedded in normative regimes that define which bodies are intelligible and which remain excluded or misrecognised (Giunta, 2021; Wayar, 2018). These critiques are particularly relevant in Latin American contexts, where national cultural institutions have historically reproduced Eurocentric, masculinised and exclusionary narratives while simultaneously presenting themselves as custodians of collective memory. The question is therefore not simply one of inclusion, but of transforming the conditions under which certain bodies are authorised to appear as part of the national cultural imaginary.

This article focuses on the Palacio Nacional de las Artes (PNA), historically known as the Palais de Glace, a state-run contemporary art institution in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Founded in the early twentieth century and long associated with national art competitions and canonical exhibitions, the institution has played a central role in shaping narratives of Argentine artistic heritage. As a public museum operating under the Ministry of Culture, the PNA occupies a strategic position within the country's cultural policy landscape, mediating between state authority, artistic production and public audiences. At the onset of the pandemic, however, the institution faced a condition of double absence: not only were its doors closed due to national lockdown measures, but its historic building had already been undergoing long-term renovations, leaving it without a stable exhibition venue. This material dislocation intensified an ongoing process of institutional redefinition under the directorship of curator Federica Baeza.

The pandemic accelerated this redefinition. As activities migrated to digital platforms, the architectural authority traditionally associated with the museum was displaced onto screens and interfaces. This shift did not simply translate exhibitions into online formats; it rearticulated the relationship between a national cultural institution, dissident artistic practices and digitally mediated publics. The museum became, in effect, an interface: an institutional body expanded through digital mediation and exposed to immediate feedback, contestation and symbolic conflict. Under these conditions, communication emerged as a privileged site for negotiating who could appear under the institution's name and how that appearance would be framed.

Against this backdrop, the FUTURA digital cycle, launched in May 2020, functioned as more than a temporary response to crisis. It can be read as a form of institutional activism that renegotiated the conditions under which marginalised bodies could appear within a national cultural institution. Rather than merely incorporating dissident voices into an unchanged framework, the programme exposed the museum to conflict, discomfort and public dispute, unsettling established hierarchies of legitimacy. By analysing the communicational strategies, performative interventions and digital frictions that shaped the FUTURA cycle, this article argues that institutional vulnerability itself became a political resource—one that redefined the museum's role in relation to marginalised identities and the democratic negotiation of visibility in contemporary Argentina.

2. The Museum as a Regime of Visibility

To understand the significance of the FUTURA cycle, it is necessary to conceptualise the museum not merely as a cultural venue but as a regime of visibility: a dispositif that regulates appearance, recognition and legitimacy. The museum is not

a neutral container of artistic practices but a structured field in which communicational, spatial and symbolic operations determine what can be seen and under what conditions.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's (2002) notion of the dispositif, the museum may be understood as a heterogeneous assemblage of discourses, architectural arrangements, administrative procedures and pedagogical narratives that organise bodies within a field of intelligibility. Tony Bennett (1995) similarly describes the modern museum as a civic technology designed to produce self-regulating subjects through exhibitionary practices. In this sense, exhibition is never merely display: it is a political act that stabilises hierarchies of value while naturalising specific forms of cultural authority. The museum's power lies less in censorship than in regulation—less in prohibition than in the structured orchestration of visibility.

Within such a framework, institutional communication cannot be reduced to an instrumental function of dissemination or branding. Communication participates in the production of the institution itself. As scholarship on media and activism has shown, communicational practices shape public meaning and political contestation rather than simply transmitting pre-existing content (Carragee, 2018; Castells, 2012). In digitally mediated environments, institutions do not stand outside networks of discourse but are embedded within them, exposed to feedback, dispute and reinterpretation. Communication thus becomes a terrain of struggle over narrative authority and symbolic legitimacy.

Studies on institutional communication in Latin America further emphasise that state cultural organisations operate within complex negotiations between bureaucratic rationality, political mandates and social movements (Godoy, 2017;

Tarullo, Frezzotti 2020). In such contexts, communication is never neutral: it mediates between official discourse and grassroots demands, between heritage preservation and contemporary claims for recognition. When institutions address historically marginalised communities, the act of communication itself participates in redefining the boundaries of inclusion. The question is not only who speaks, but who is authorised to appear under institutional endorsement.

This issue becomes particularly urgent when examined through transfeminist and dissident critiques of representation. Authors such as Marlene Wayar (2018), Paul B. Preciado (2013) and Andrea Giunta (2021) have demonstrated that visibility is inseparable from normative regimes that render certain bodies intelligible while relegating others to invisibility, hypervisibility or spectacle. From this perspective, inclusion within institutional frameworks does not automatically guarantee emancipation; it may reproduce asymmetries if the underlying conditions of appearance remain unchanged. The politics of representation therefore requires interrogating the institutional apparatus that confers legitimacy in the first place.

When the museum is approached as a regime of visibility, its architectural space appears as only one component of a broader regulatory system. Exhibition design, curatorial discourse, educational programming and communication strategies collectively produce the institution's public body. The building stabilises authority through spatial separation—between artwork and viewer, expert and audience, centre and margin. Yet these separations are not immutable. They are historically contingent arrangements that can be rearticulated, especially under conditions of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the spatial foundation of the museum by suspending physical co-presence. As institutions migrated to digital platforms, the architectural dispositif was partially displaced by platform-based logics structured by algorithmic visibility, immediacy and interactivity. This shift did not simply dematerialise the museum; it transformed the conditions under which institutional authority is performed. In social media environments, visibility is no longer exclusively curated by experts but co-produced through comments, shares and affective reactions. The institutional voice becomes entangled with user-generated responses, creating zones of friction that exceed the controlled temporality of the exhibition space.

From a technopolitical perspective, platforms operate as infrastructures that distribute attention unevenly while amplifying conflict and affect (Castells, 2012). For cultural institutions, inhabiting these environments entails negotiating between state legitimacy and networked publics. The museum's communicational body becomes porous, subject to reinterpretation and contestation. The authority traditionally anchored in walls and collections must now be enacted through interfaces and metrics, where recognition is shaped by algorithms and digital circulation.

This transformation intensifies pre-existing disputes over representation. If the museum regulates appearance through spatial and curatorial dispositifs, digital platforms introduce additional layers of mediation that can both expand and constrain visibility. Marginalised identities may gain unprecedented access to institutional channels, yet their appearance remains framed by communicational strategies that risk either domestication or tokenisation. The pandemic thus amplified a structural tension: how can a national cultural institution host dissident bodies without neutralising their disruptive force?

Understanding institutional activism requires situating it within this dynamic field. Activism, in communicational terms, is not limited to explicit political messaging; it involves interventions that challenge dominant frames and redistribute visibility (Carragee, 2018). When such interventions occur within state institutions, they generate a paradoxical configuration: the institution becomes both regulator and site of contestation. Rather than opposing the museum from outside, institutional activism operates from within, exposing the instability of its own authority.

In this sense, the museum's communicational practices during the pandemic must be analysed as performative acts that reshape its regime of visibility. The shift to digital platforms did not merely compensate for physical closure; it foregrounded communication as the primary mechanism through which the institution constituted itself. The absence of architectural space made visible what is often naturalised: that the museum's power resides in its capacity to orchestrate appearance.

The theoretical convergence outlined here leads to three central propositions that frame the analysis of the FUTURA cycle. First, the museum regulates the conditions of appearance by organising visibility through discursive and spatial dispositifs. Second, institutional communication is constitutive rather than instrumental; it actively produces legitimacy and public meaning. Third, the pandemic intensified disputes over visibility by relocating institutional authority into digital environments governed by technopolitical logics.

It is at the intersection of these dynamics—regulatory power, communicational production and intensified visibility struggles—that the FUTURA cycle can be examined as a form of institutional activism. Rather than understanding it as a

simple programme of digital outreach, it must be read as an intervention within the museum's regime of visibility itself: a reconfiguration of who could appear, how, and under what institutional endorsement.

3. Double Absence and Institutional Reconfiguration

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Palacio Nacional de las Artes (PNA) was already operating under conditions of spatial instability. Its historic building in Buenos Aires—long associated with national art salons and canonical exhibitions—had been closed for extensive renovations. Unlike other museums that faced sudden lockdowns in March 2020, the PNA had already been displaced from its architectural centre. When nationwide restrictions suspended all cultural activities, this prior condition of material absence was intensified. The institution found itself doubly absent: without a building and without the possibility of physical encounter.

This double absence did not simply interrupt programming. It destabilised the spatial foundation upon which the museum's authority traditionally rests. The architectural body of the museum functions as a guarantor of legitimacy: it frames artworks, disciplines circulation and separates institutional space from the contingencies of everyday life. Without walls, galleries or ceremonial entrances, the symbolic coherence of the institution becomes more precarious. The absence of a physical site exposed the extent to which the museum's power is anchored in spatial arrangement.

Under these circumstances, communication ceased to be ancillary and became constitutive. Social media channels, streaming platforms and digital announcements were no longer promotional tools but the primary site through which the institution performed its existence. The museum's body

was displaced onto screens and interfaces. Its authority had to be enacted discursively, through posts, captions, live broadcasts and visual identities that substituted for architectural presence.

This shift foregrounded a fundamental question: if the institution no longer occupied a stable physical space, where did its body reside? The notion of the "institutional body" becomes particularly productive here. The museum is not only a building but a symbolic configuration that organises recognition. Its body is composed of collections, staff, narratives and communicational gestures that collectively produce institutional identity. When the architectural component is withdrawn, the remaining elements—especially communication—must sustain that identity.

The appointment of curator Federica Baeza as director formed part of this process of redefinition. Her curatorial trajectory, associated with gender perspectives and dissident artistic practices, signalled an intention to rearticulate the institution's symbolic framework. Rather than merely awaiting the reopening of the renovated building, the administration pursued an active strategy of repositioning. The crisis thus became an opportunity for institutional reconfiguration, not simply a period of suspension.

However, this reconfiguration unfolded within structural tensions. As a state-run institution, the PNA operates within bureaucratic frameworks that stabilise certain narratives of national culture. At the same time, contemporary cultural debates in Argentina have been shaped by feminist and transfeminist movements that challenge exclusionary traditions within art history and museum practice. The institution therefore stood at the intersection of state authority and dissident demands for recognition. The double absence

intensified this intersection: without the stabilising effect of physical space, the symbolic negotiation of legitimacy became more visible and more vulnerable.

The displacement to digital environments further transformed the dynamics of authority. On platforms governed by immediacy and public commentary, institutional discourse is exposed to immediate feedback and potential controversy. The museum cannot fully control interpretative frames; its communicational acts circulate within broader networks of debate. In this context, every post becomes a performative act that shapes the contours of institutional identity. The absence of architecture amplifies the visibility of discourse.

This amplification redirected attention toward the politics of appearance. If the museum's body was now primarily symbolic, constituted through communication, then the question of who could appear under its endorsement acquired renewed urgency. The absence of walls did not eliminate regulation; rather, it relocated it. Decisions regarding invited artists, thematic focuses and visual representation became decisive gestures in defining the institution's rearticulated body.

The double absence thus produced a paradox. On one hand, the lack of a physical venue threatened institutional authority by dissolving the spatial markers that traditionally confer prestige. On the other hand, it opened a space of experimentation in which the museum could renegotiate its representational boundaries. Freed, at least temporarily, from architectural constraints and exhibition logistics, the institution operated within a more flexible symbolic field. Yet this flexibility also heightened exposure: symbolic redefinition unfolded in real time, under public scrutiny.

In this context, institutional reconfiguration cannot be understood as a purely administrative adjustment. It involved a reimagining of the museum's corporeality. If the building historically stabilised a normative image of national culture, the shift to digital communication foregrounded the possibility of assembling a different institutional body—one composed not only of canonical artworks but of voices and subjectivities historically marginalised within the museum's narrative.

The crisis, therefore, should not be interpreted solely as an external disruption. It functioned as a catalyst that revealed the museum's dependence on spatial authority while simultaneously forcing a relocation of its regulatory power to the symbolic plane. Physical absence generated communicational centrality; communicational centrality intensified disputes over visibility; and these disputes, in turn, redefined the contours of institutional identity.

It is within this configuration of double absence and symbolic intensification that the FUTURA cycle emerged. The programme did not simply fill an empty calendar during lockdown. It operated within a museum whose body had become discursive, whose authority had to be performed online, and whose legitimacy was increasingly entangled with the politics of marginalised identities. The absence of space thus became the condition for a renewed struggle over appearance—over which bodies could inhabit the institutional frame and under what terms.

4. FUTURA as Institutional Activism

Launched in May 2020, the FUTURA cycle was presented as a digital programme designed to sustain artistic activity during lockdown. Yet to read it merely as a strategy of continuity would obscure its deeper implications. Within the context of

double absence and communicational centrality, FUTURA functioned as an intervention in the museum's regime of visibility. Rather than simply filling a void left by physical closure, the cycle rearticulated the institutional body by staging forms of appearance historically marginalised within national cultural frameworks.

The programme brought together a heterogeneous group of artists, performers and cultural producers associated with queer, transfeminist and experimental practices in Argentina. Figures such as Nancy Rojas and the collective El Pelele signalled the cycle's alignment with dissident aesthetics and performative risk. However, it is through three specific cases—Diego de Aduriz, Naty Menstrual and Mabel—that the dynamics of institutional activism become particularly legible. Each instance did not simply add content to the museum's digital feed; it produced friction within the institutional frame, testing the limits of endorsement and visibility.

Diego de Aduriz: Conflict and the Exposure of the Institutional Frame

The participation of Diego de Aduriz generated immediate controversy in the comment sections of the museum's social media channels. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the performance, a significant portion of audience responses questioned its legitimacy, tone or perceived political positioning. The digital interface transformed reception into visible dispute: disagreement was not contained within private interpretation but inscribed directly beneath the institutional post.

From an analytical perspective, what matters is not the specific content of each comment but the way conflict became publicly attached to the institution. By hosting the performance, the

museum effectively assumed responsibility for the symbolic consequences of its visibility. The comment thread functioned as a site where the boundaries of institutional legitimacy were contested in real time. Supportive messages coexisted with hostility, irony and rejection, producing an unstable field of recognition.

In traditional exhibition settings, institutional authority absorbs controversy within spatial and temporal distance. Digital platforms, by contrast, collapse that distance. The museum's endorsement and public reaction appear simultaneously on the same screen. In this configuration, FUTURA did not merely represent dissident practice; it exposed the institution to the risks of that representation. Institutional activism here operates through deliberate vulnerability: by allowing conflict to remain visible rather than neutralising it, the museum destabilised the expectation of consensual cultural authority.

The case of de Aduriz thus reveals a shift in the museum's regulatory function. Instead of filtering dissent to maintain symbolic coherence, the institution permitted the coexistence of friction and endorsement. Visibility became agonistic rather than harmonious. In doing so, the museum redefined its authority not as the guarantor of aesthetic consensus but as a platform capable of sustaining dispute.

Naty Menstrual: Scatology, Dissident Corporeality and the Limits of Respectability

If the de Aduriz case foregrounded conflict, the participation of Naty Menstrual intensified the question of corporeal legitimacy. Known for a poetics that embraces excess, profanity and bodily materiality, Menstrual's intervention confronted the museum with forms of expression traditionally excluded from respectable cultural space. References to excrement,

sexual dissidence and abject humour unsettled the decorum historically associated with national institutions.

The analytical significance lies not in cataloguing provocative elements but in understanding how their institutional framing altered their meaning. When such language and imagery circulate in independent or underground spaces, they function as countercultural gestures. When they appear under the emblem of a state-run museum, they acquire a different resonance. The museum's endorsement disrupts the implicit boundary between high culture and abject corporeality.

This disruption does not eliminate asymmetry. The institution still controls the frame of presentation. However, by legitimising a dissident body whose aesthetics challenge norms of propriety, the museum intervened in the distribution of cultural respectability. The performance did not simply add diversity to programming; it strained the symbolic alignment between national culture and sanitized representation.

Digital mediation amplified this strain. On social media platforms, the performance circulated beyond specialised art audiences, encountering viewers who may not share the interpretative frameworks of queer or transfeminist communities. The institutional post thus operated as a relay between subcultural aesthetics and broader publics. The discomfort expressed in certain reactions underscores the political dimension of this circulation: what is at stake is not taste but the recognisability of dissident corporeality within the national cultural body.

In this case, institutional activism manifests as a recalibration of respectability. By hosting Menstrual's poetics without dilution, the museum reconfigured the threshold of what can appear as legitimate culture. The abject body did not remain outside; it entered the institutional frame, compelling a renegotiation of visibility's normative limits.

Mabel: Fall, Transformation and the Fragility of Institutional Identity

The intervention by Mabel, centred on themes of fall and transformation, offers a different modality of institutional rearticulation. Rather than provoking explicit controversy, the performance enacted vulnerability at the level of metaphor and gesture. The imagery of falling—whether literal or symbolic—resonated with the museum's own condition of instability during renovation and lockdown.

Here, the analytical emphasis shifts from conflict to identification. The performance mirrored the institution's precarious state, staging fragility as a generative condition rather than a failure. In doing so, it suggested that transformation requires the suspension of stable ground. For a museum deprived of its building and displaced into digital space, such imagery acquired reflexive force.

Institutional activism in this instance does not operate through overt provocation but through symbolic alignment. By endorsing a performance that thematises collapse and reconstitution, the museum implicitly acknowledged its own transitional status. Authority was not presented as intact and unshaken; it was articulated as undergoing change. The fall becomes a metaphor for institutional reconfiguration.

This alignment complicates conventional understandings of state institutions as rigid or immobile. The museum appears instead as a body capable of transformation, albeit within constraints. The performance did not dissolve institutional hierarchy, but it contributed to a narrative in which instability becomes a shared condition rather than a hidden weakness. Visibility, in this sense, encompasses not only marginalised bodies but also institutional vulnerability.

Beyond Programming: Activism as Reconfiguration of Appearance

Across these cases, a pattern emerges. FUTURA did not simply increase representation; it altered the conditions under which representation occurred. Conflict was not erased but displayed. Abject corporeality was not marginalised but institutionally framed. Fragility was not concealed but thematised.

Nancy Rojas and El Pelele, among others in the cycle, reinforced this orientation toward performative experimentation and dissident aesthetics. Collectively, the programme assembled an institutional body that diverged from canonical images of national culture. The emphasis on performance, digital immediacy and embodied discourse foregrounded subjectivities often excluded from museum narratives.

To describe FUTURA as institutional activism, therefore, is not to attribute explicit political campaigning to the museum. Rather, it is to recognise that the programme intervened in the distribution of visibility within a state framework. Activism here operates at the level of institutional form: through communicational decisions that redistribute recognition, expose authority to dispute and recalibrate thresholds of legitimacy.

Crucially, this activism unfolded within digital platforms whose technopolitical logics intensified exposure. Comments, shares and algorithmic circulation ensured that institutional gestures could not remain insulated. The museum's endorsement became inseparable from public reaction. This entanglement destabilised the asymmetry between institution and audience, even if it did not eliminate it.

In this sense, FUTURA exemplifies a shift from representational inclusion to structural renegotiation. The programme did not merely place marginalised bodies inside an unchanged museum; it modified the museum's own mode of appearance. The institutional body became discursive, contested and porous. Authority was performed through vulnerability, and legitimacy emerged through engagement with friction rather than its avoidance.

The significance of FUTURA lies precisely in this recalibration. Within the context of double absence and intensified digital mediation, the cycle functioned as a laboratory for reimagining the museum's regime of visibility. By hosting performances that generated conflict, embodied dissidence and staged transformation, the institution redefined the parameters of who could appear—and how—under its name.

Institutional activism, in this configuration, is neither external protest nor rhetorical declaration. It is a practice of reconfiguring the apparatus of visibility from within. FUTURA did not dismantle the museum as a dispositif, but it displaced its coordinates, demonstrating that even a national cultural institution can renegotiate the conditions of appearance when confronted with crisis and symbolic instability.

5. Digital Friction and the Politics of Discomfort

The conflicts generated by the FUTURA cycle cannot be understood as secondary reactions to artistic content. They must be analysed as constitutive elements of the event itself. Instagram, the primary platform through which the programme circulated, is not a neutral channel of dissemination but a technopolitical environment structured by visibility metrics, affective immediacy and algorithmic amplification. Within such an environment, institutional communication becomes inseparable from public response.

Unlike the spatial separation that characterises the traditional museum—where disagreement unfolds privately or through delayed criticism—Instagram collapses institutional voice and audience reaction into a single interface. Posts, captions, images and comment threads coexist in real time. The museum's endorsement of dissident performances thus became inseparable from the visible reactions they provoked. Hostile comments, moralising objections and ironic dismissals did not occur outside the institutional frame; they appeared directly beneath it.

This digital proximity transforms friction into spectacle. The comment section functions as a site where competing regimes of visibility collide. For some users, the appearance of transfeminist or queer performances under the emblem of a national museum represented an expansion of cultural recognition. For others, it signified an unacceptable deviation from established norms of artistic value and public decorum. The hostility expressed in certain threads reveals not merely aesthetic disagreement but a defence of a classical regime of visibility—one grounded in assumptions about neutrality, heritage and the separation between art and explicit political discourse.

From this perspective, conservative reactions can be interpreted as attempts to restore a familiar symbolic order. When users question the legitimacy of dissident bodies within a state institution, they implicitly invoke an image of the museum as a guardian of stable tradition. The discomfort provoked by FUTURA thus exposes the underlying expectations that structure institutional authority. The digital platform renders these expectations visible by allowing them to be articulated spontaneously and publicly.

Importantly, the museum's decision not to systematically suppress or neutralise critical comments altered the dynamics of authority. By permitting the coexistence of endorsement and hostility within the same digital space, the institution allowed friction to remain perceptible. This does not imply the absence of moderation or responsibility; rather, it signals a willingness to inhabit discomfort as part of institutional practice. The museum did not retreat into silence nor retreat from the dissident programme. Instead, it maintained its position while exposed to contestation.

Digital friction therefore becomes politically productive. It reveals that visibility is never simply granted but constantly negotiated. Marginalised identities do not enter institutional space without resistance; their appearance destabilises pre-existing hierarchies. The hostility visible in comment threads demonstrates that the museum's rearticulation of its symbolic body encountered active opposition. Yet this opposition confirms the stakes of the intervention: if visibility were inconsequential, it would not provoke such reaction.

At the same time, the technopolitical structure of Instagram intensifies polarisation. Algorithms privilege engagement, and conflict often generates heightened interaction. The platform thus amplifies affective responses, potentially magnifying hostility beyond its proportional scale. Institutional activism within such environments entails navigating a paradox: digital circulation expands reach while simultaneously exposing the institution to amplified backlash. The politics of discomfort are inseparable from the logics of platform capitalism.

This dynamic connects directly to the question of marginalised identities. Transfeminist and queer bodies have historically been subjected either to invisibility or to sensationalised hypervisibility. Within FUTURA, their appearance was

institutionally framed yet digitally contested. The comment sections illustrate how recognition is never secure; it remains vulnerable to delegitimising discourse that seeks to confine dissident subjectivities to peripheral spaces. The defence of a "neutral" museum often masks a desire to preserve exclusionary norms.

Thus, digital friction should not be treated as noise surrounding the programme. It is an analytical lens through which the reconfiguration of institutional authority becomes legible. Instagram functioned as a battleground where competing understandings of culture, nation and legitimacy were articulated. The discomfort produced by FUTURA was not an accidental by-product but evidence of a shifting regime of visibility.

In this sense, the politics of discomfort extend beyond individual performances. They signal a broader transformation in how national cultural institutions operate within networked publics. When the museum relocates its authority into digital space, it relinquishes some degree of control over interpretation. What emerges is a more porous, contested and affectively charged institutional presence. The appearance of marginalised bodies within this space does not stabilise inclusion; it initiates an ongoing negotiation over the boundaries of legitimacy.

Digital friction, therefore, marks the threshold at which institutional activism becomes visible as struggle. It is within this contested interface—where endorsement and rejection coexist—that the politics of appearance are most sharply defined.

6. Conclusion: Beyond Inclusion

The FUTURA cycle cannot be adequately described through the vocabulary of inclusion. To suggest that the Palacio Nacional de las Artes simply "included" marginalised identities would imply the extension of an unchanged institutional framework to previously excluded subjects. Such a formulation leaves intact the regulatory apparatus that determines who may appear and under what conditions. The case analysed here demonstrates something more unstable and politically consequential.

Rather than incorporating dissident bodies into a stable structure, the museum produced conflictive conditions of appearance. Through its digital programme, it reconfigured its regime of visibility at a moment when its architectural authority was suspended and its communicational presence had become primary. In doing so, the institution did not merely diversify its programming; it exposed its own normative boundaries to public dispute.

The analysis of the FUTURA cycle has shown that this reconfiguration operated on multiple levels. First, the museum displaced its authority into digital platforms, where endorsement and reaction coexist in the same interface. Visibility was no longer orchestrated solely through curatorial mediation but entangled with comments, algorithmic circulation and affective polarisation. Second, the programme hosted performances that strained conventional alignments between national culture and aesthetic respectability, thereby unsettling assumptions about what can legitimately appear under the emblem of a state institution. Third, the museum did not retreat from the friction generated by these appearances. By sustaining the programme despite hostility and discomfort, it accepted the possibility of symbolic destabilisation.

This acceptance entailed risk. Institutional legitimacy—particularly within national cultural frameworks—depends on perceptions of authority, continuity and symbolic coherence. By foregrounding dissident corporealities and allowing digital conflict to remain visible, the museum exposed itself to accusations of excess, politicisation or deviation from tradition. The controversy surrounding certain interventions did not occur outside the institution; it unfolded directly within its communicational space. In this sense, institutional activism involved a willingness to confront the potential erosion of consensual authority.

To characterise this process as activism is not to conflate it with external protest or partisan messaging. Rather, activism here refers to a transformation in institutional form: a recalibration of the apparatus that regulates appearance. The museum did not dismantle its regulatory function; it rearticulated it. By shifting the thresholds of legitimacy and staging its authority within contested digital environments, it destabilised the normative image of the institutional body as neutral, coherent and uncontested.

The concept of the institutional body has been central throughout this analysis. Traditionally anchored in architecture and canon, that body appeared stable and self-evident. Under conditions of double absence—renovation and lockdown—it became discursive and exposed. The FUTURA cycle assembled a different institutional corporeality, one composed of performances that foregrounded vulnerability, dissidence and transformation. This assemblage did not resolve tensions between state authority and marginalised identities; it rendered those tensions visible.

Such visibility is not inherently emancipatory. Digital platforms amplify hostility as readily as recognition. Yet the

willingness to inhabit discomfort marks a departure from models of institutional neutrality that often mask exclusionary norms. By permitting conflict to emerge within its own communicational frame, the museum acknowledged that the politics of culture cannot be insulated from the politics of recognition.

The broader implication of this case extends beyond a single programme or national context. As cultural institutions continue to operate within hybrid physical-digital environments, their authority will increasingly depend on how they negotiate contested visibility. The FUTURA cycle suggests that institutional vulnerability—understood as the exposure of authority to friction and potential loss of legitimacy—can function as a democratic practice. It signals a shift from protecting symbolic coherence to engaging with the instability inherent in plural publics.

Beyond inclusion, then, lies a more demanding task: the reconfiguration of the conditions under which bodies appear within institutional space. In embracing that task amid crisis, the museum did not simply adapt to circumstance. It enacted a form of institutional activism that unsettled its own normative boundaries and redefined what it means for a national cultural institution to be publicly accountable.

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Neurodiversity And Social Exclusion: Understanding Marginalization of Neurodevelopmental Differences

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Abstract:

Marginalization is a multilayered concept resulting from the actions of human society that are conceived socio-economically and politically, where a person or group is made to feel of lesser importance by those in power. The dominant society identifies a marginal group, which leads to discrimination and subordination. This often results in these groups being perceived as less human, useless, or undesirable for progression. Marginalization can manifest in various contexts, including towards individuals who are suffering from mental health conditions. Neurodevelopmental disorders are conditions that typically begin in the early developmental period of life, causing impairments in the social, academic, or occupational function. The DSM-5-TR categorizes intellectual developmental disorders, communication disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Motor Disorders, and Specific Learning Disorders under Neurodevelopmental Disorders. Because these conditions diverge from societal norms, individuals with Neurodevelopmental disorders are often stigmatized and viewed as less capable. People with such conditions and their families often internalize these negative attitudes, resulting in low self-esteem, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Caregivers frequently report a lack of social support and acceptance

from family or community, leading them to withdraw from public life. Historically, people with cognitive or behavioural differences were derogatorily labelled and often segregated from society. This legacy of dehumanization persists even today, with many schools, workplaces, and public services failing to accommodate neurodiverse learners, so individuals with Neurodevelopmental disorders cannot access needed resources or opportunities. The present chapter incorporates a narrative review-based approach to outline the key psychosocial frameworks and sociological models that explain how neurodivergent identities become marginalized in various contexts in society. The chapter also explores the attitudes of others toward individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, the ways in which they cope with everyday challenges, and the forms of discrimination they encounter in different social contexts.

Key words: *Neurodevelopmental Disorders, Marginalization, Stigma, Social Exclusion, Neurodiversity*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of neurodiversity is a revolutionary perspective through which society may re-evaluate the natural variation in human cognitive functioning. The term "neurodiversity" was first coined by Judy Singer, an Australian Sociologist, in her thesis (De & Basu, 2025). She argued that cognitive variations should be viewed politically as minority groups who are deserving of human rights. The concept was further mainstreamed by works such as Steve Silberman's book on "NeuroTribes" which highlighted the history of autism and the need for acceptance, and through online communities where neurodivergent individuals could connect and advocate for themselves. However, the prevailing social reality for neurodivergent individuals remains one of deep-seated marginalization.

Marginalization is a sociological process through which individuals or groups are pushed to the edges of society. It limits their access to resources, opportunities, and participation in social life. The concept of social exclusion is closely related to marginalization and often overlaps with it (Singh et al., 2024). For those with neurodevelopmental disorders, marginalization often stems from social attitudes that view neurological differences as deficits or disabilities instead of variations in human functioning. This deficit-focused mindset creates barriers in education, employment, healthcare, and social relationships. As a result, the challenges faced by individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders arise not only from their neurological differences but also from structural inequalities and discriminatory practices in society.

Historically, disability and neurodevelopmental conditions have been understood through the medical model of disability. This model sees disability as a problem within the individual that needs treatment or correction (Oliver, 1990). In this view, neurodevelopmental disorders are seen mostly as abnormal changes in natural development. While the medical model has helped create diagnostic criteria and clinical treatments, it has also promoted negative views that label individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders as deficient or incapable. In contrast, the social model of disability suggests that disability arises from the interaction between a person's impairments and societal barriers. These barriers include inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary practices (Shakespeare, 2013). From this viewpoint, the marginalization of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders is largely a result of social structures that do not support neurological diversity. The idea of neurodiversity further challenges negative views of

neurodevelopmental disorders. First popularized by the autistic self-advocacy movement, neurodiversity sees neurological differences, such as autism and ADHD, as natural variations of the human brain rather than conditions that need to be fixed (Singer, 1999). Supporters of neurodiversity believe that individuals with neurodevelopmental differences have unique strengths and perspectives that can benefit society when they receive the right support and acceptance. Despite the growing influence of the neurodiversity movement, many individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders still face social stigma and systemic discrimination. Research shows that societal attitudes toward these conditions are often shaped by misconceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of understanding, which continue to drive marginalization. The educational setting is one of the main settings where marginalisation is visible. According to Humphrey and Symes (2013), children with neurodevelopmental disorders frequently face obstacles to inclusive education, such as insufficient support services, a lack of teacher preparation, and unfavourable peer attitudes. Despite the fact that many nations have adopted inclusive education policies, students with neurodevelopmental disorders often face social exclusion, bullying, and lowered academic expectations. Research shows that compared to their peers who are typically developing, children with autism spectrum disorder and ADHD are much more likely to be victimised and rejected by their peers (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). These experiences have an impact on academic performance as well as long-term psychological effects like depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Beyond childhood, marginalisation persists into adulthood, especially when it comes to work and economic engagement. Due to workplace discrimination, a lack of accommodations, and a

lack of awareness of neurodiversity among employers, adults with neurodevelopmental disorders frequently face significant challenges in finding and keeping a job (Scott, Falkmer, Girdler, & Falkmer, 2015). For instance, studies on adults with autism spectrum disorder indicate that, despite having similar or even better skills in areas like analytical thinking and attention to detail, employment rates among this population are still much lower than those of the general population (Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014). These differences in employment show how marginalisation is often caused by structural obstacles rather than personal weakness. The experiences of people with neurodevelopmental disorders are also significantly shaped by healthcare systems. Depending on socioeconomic status, location, and cultural context, access to appropriate diagnosis, treatment, and support services frequently varies greatly (Daniels & Mandell, 2014). Inadequate access to specialised services and delayed diagnosis can worsen developmental difficulties and reduce opportunities for early intervention. According to Nicolaidis et al. (2015), people with neurodevelopmental disorders also often report negative experiences in healthcare settings, such as professional misunderstandings, a lack of patient-centred communication, and inadequate accommodation of sensory or cognitive needs. These obstacles exacerbate feelings of exclusion within institutional systems intended to deliver care and contribute to health disparities. Another area where marginalisation is commonly encountered is in social interactions and community involvement. Due to social communication differences, stigma, and limited opportunities for inclusive interaction, people with neurodevelopmental disorders frequently struggle to establish and sustain friendships (Müller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, 2003). People with atypical social patterns are frequently disadvantaged in

environments created by societal expectations regarding normative behaviour and communication styles. People with neurodevelopmental disorders may consequently feel excluded from community activities, lonely, and socially isolated. These incidents demonstrate how cultural expectations and social norms can unintentionally marginalise people whose actions deviate from accepted norms. One of the main ways that marginalisation is maintained is through stigma. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is a social process that results in discrimination and decreased social acceptance by devaluing particular characteristics. Stigma frequently takes the form of labelling, stereotyping, and unfavourable presumptions about competence or capability when it comes to neurodevelopmental disorders. For example, people with autism may be stereotyped as intellectually limited or socially uninterested, whereas people with ADHD may be seen as lazy or unruly. These false beliefs may affect how people are treated in social situations, at work, and in educational institutions. Additionally, people with neurodevelopmental disorders may develop negative self-perceptions as a result of internalised stigma, which could have an impact on their self-advocacy and mental health. The marginalisation that people with neurodevelopmental disorders experience is made more difficult by intersectionality. The term "intersectionality" describes how social identities like gender, race, class, and disability are interrelated and collectively influence experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). People with neurodevelopmental disorders may experience additional disadvantages if they are members of other marginalised groups. For instance, studies show that due to differences in healthcare access and cultural biases in diagnostic procedures, children from minority ethnic backgrounds frequently have delayed diagnoses of autism

and ADHD (Mandell et al., 2009). In a similar vein, socioeconomic disadvantage may restrict access to advocacy support, counselling services, and educational materials. Therefore, an intersectional approach that takes into account how various forms of inequality interact to shape lived experiences is necessary to understand marginalisation. The psychological consequences of marginalization among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders create substantial impacts. Social exclusion and discrimination combined with restricted access to opportunities lead to increased mental health issues which include anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Hedley et al., 2018). Unaccommodating spaces create chronic stress for people, which results in emotional exhaustion and decreased life satisfaction. Research establishes that resilience, community support and self-advocacy function as protective factors which decrease the harmful impacts of marginalization. Individuals with neurodevelopmental differences achieve better empowerment and well-being through supportive social networks and inclusive educational practices, and recognition of neurodiversity. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on recognizing the need to shift from deficit-based approaches to those that are more inclusive of human rights-based approaches. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) promotes a set of principles related to equality, accessibility, and full participation of persons with disabilities (including those with neurodevelopmental disorders) (United Nations, 2006). These principles create a framework from which legislators, educators, healthcare providers, and communities are encouraged to eliminate systemic barriers and create inclusive spaces that acknowledge diversity in neurological function. Although there is greater recognition

of these issues than ever before, substantial gaps still exist in our understanding of marginalized individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. Past literature primarily examined clinical characteristics and treatment modalities, rather than examining the social environments that individuals and their families must navigate. Research now suggests that the best way to understand the impact of marginalization is to examine subjective experiences, the social context of the lived experience, and the structural inequalities that exist in everyday life for an individual with a neurodevelopmental disorder. The use of a subjective lens in studying experiences of marginalization provides significant information about how social systems create barriers to inclusion, and how best to create inclusive practices to promote equity and participation.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF MARGINALIZATION

To understand the marginalization of neurodivergent identities, it is important to understand the psychological and sociological models that explain how "difference" is transformed into "disadvantage". Marginalization is a context-dependent othering process that leads to disadvantage (Fluit, 2024). Stigma is the primary vehicle for this transformation, as it acts as a social dynamic that reinforces existing power relations to control those who deviate from the norm (Rodrigues et al., 2025).

The post-colonial theory regarded marginalization as a legacy of colonial power, as colonizers constructed non-Western peoples as "other," justifying their exclusion and control (Eve, 2015).

One of the most critical frameworks in the study of social exclusion is the conceptualization provided by Bruce Link and Jo Phelan, who define stigma as the co-occurrence of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within a context where power is exercised (Link & Phelan, 2001). Within stigma theory, disability stigma is broken down into: public stigma, self stigma, and courtesy/affiliate stigma (Mueller et al., 2012). Public stigma occurs when large segments of society label a group (e.g., "autists" or "retards") as untrustworthy or incapable. In the clinical context, the diagnostic process itself acts as the first step of labelling. Erving Goffman's perspective provides further understanding of stigma. Goffman distinguishes between "discredited" those whose stigma is visible, and the "discreditable" those whose stigma is not visible but potentially discoverable (Chaudoir et al., 2013). In other words, Goffman noted that stigma can be either visible, such as skin colour, or hidden, such criminal record that may be revealed (Clair, 2024).

Colic (2023), highlighted that stigma can be understood by the following types:

Courtesy Stigma: It is originally coined by Goffman and refers to the stigma that individuals acquire not because of their own attributes but because of their relationship with a stigmatized person.

Experienced stigma: This refers to actual experiences of overt rejection or discrimination.

Perceived Stigma: This is defined as the beliefs parents hold regarding the negative attitudes of others toward themselves or their children.

Affiliate Stigma: Also known as internalized stigma, it happens when family members internalize others' negative attitudes and apply the stigma to themselves.

Felt Stigma: It is the anticipation of discrimination and is characterized by emotions such as fear and shame

Double Stigma: The study briefly notes a phenomenon where a parent may internalize stigma due to their own characteristics, such as their own mental illness, and internalize stigma due to their child's disability, resulting in a "double stigma".

2. THE LANDSCAPE OF NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS

The DSM-5-TR categorizes neurodevelopmental disorders as conditions that originate during the developmental period and cause significant impairments in functioning. The shift from DSM IV to DSM-5-TR reflects a shift in understanding neurodevelopmental disorders as a continuum rather than isolated pathologies. Currently, the DSM-5-TR categorizes Intellectual Disabilities, Communication Disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Specific Learning Disorder, Motor Disorders, and Other Neurodevelopmental Disorders under this category (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

2.1. Intellectual Developmental Disorders

It is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. The severity levels of this disorder, such as mild, moderate, severe, and profound, are no longer based solely on IQ scores but also depend on adaptive functioning, such as personal care and social participation. The marginalization of individuals with intellectual disabilities is linked to the historical belief that they are "unteachable" and other stereotypes that still influence community-based services even today.

2.2. Autism Spectrum and Communication Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. Symptoms usually appear in early childhood and vary in severity depending on the level of support required. Communication disorders include language disorder, speech sound disorder, childhood-onset fluency disorder (stuttering), and social (pragmatic) communication disorder. These conditions involve persistent difficulties in the production, comprehension, or social use of language that significantly affect academic and social functioning.

2.3. ADHD and Specific Learning Disorders

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) involves a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity–impulsivity that interferes with development and functioning. Symptoms must be present before the age of 12 and occur in multiple settings. Specific Learning Disorder (SLD) refers to persistent difficulties in learning academic skills such as reading, writing, or mathematics, despite adequate instruction and intelligence, and these difficulties significantly impact academic performance.

2.4. Motor Disorders

Motor disorders involve impairments in the acquisition and execution of coordinated motor skills. Developmental Coordination Disorder is marked by difficulties in performing age-appropriate motor tasks. Other conditions include stereotypic movement disorder, characterized by repetitive motor behaviours, and tic disorders such as Tourette's disorder, which involve sudden, recurrent motor movements or vocalizations.

Globally, neurodevelopmental disorders are common. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about 317 million children and young people (under 20) in 2019 had conditions leading to developmental disabilities (World Health Organization, 2023). UNICEF similarly reports that roughly 1 in 6 children worldwide has a disability, with the majority of these in low-income regions (Chansa-Kabali et at., 2025). Precisely, about 240 million children and adolescents live with some disability, and over 53 million have serious developmental disabilities. There is a considerable phenotypic overlap and comorbidity among neurodevelopmental disorders. For example, between 22% and 83% of children with ASD also display symptoms that meet the criteria for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Morris et al., 2020). These numbers highlight the vast scale of neurodiversity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter adopts a narrative review approach to synthesize existing research on the marginalization of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

3.1. Search Strategy: A systematic search of relevant literature was conducted across several academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Google Scholar. The search process involved combinations of keywords related to both neurodevelopmental disorders and social exclusion. The primary search terms included *"neurodevelopmental disorders," "neurodiversity," "stigma," "marginalization," "social exclusion," "intellectual disability," "autism," "ADHD," "learning disability," "communication disorders,"* and *"motor disorders"*. Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to combine keywords and refine search results.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria: Studies were selected based on their relevance to the themes of marginalization, stigma, and social experiences of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. The review included:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Narrative reviews and systematic reviews
- Empirical research studies examining social, educational, healthcare, or workplace experiences
- Theoretical and sociological analyses relevant to disability and stigma

Only literature available in English was considered.

3.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis: After identifying relevant sources, duplicates were removed and the abstracts of the remaining articles were screened for relevance. Full-text articles that met the inclusion criteria were then reviewed in detail. Key information was extracted from each study, including the population examined, type of neurodevelopmental disorder, context of marginalization (education, employment, healthcare, or social settings), and major findings related to stigma or exclusion.

4. FINDINGS ON EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION

Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders face exclusion across multiple societal domains, such as social, educational, employment, and healthcare settings, which reduces their participation and impacts their well-being. This section outlines disorder-specific marginalization faced by individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders and highlights how marginalization manifests across varied social settings.

A review by Chauhan et al. (2025) highlighted that individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders are historically marginalized by labels like "insane" or "feeble-minded". It revealed that stigma is a barrier to social inclusion as it leads to discrimination against individuals in education and employment.

4.1. Intellectual Disability (ID): People with intellectual disabilities face compounded risks of institutionalization and social exclusion compared to others with disabilities. Even when living in the community, they often experience "virtual exclusion" where they remain socially isolated despite their physical presence (Bigby, 2012). A systematic review by Harrison et al (2021) highlighted that adults with ID experience "thwarted opportunities" that is, the desire for an "ordinary" life and relations, which is constantly blocked by systematic barriers. Ditchman et al (2013) found that while mental illness often elicits fear and blame, ID stigma is characterized by pity and perceptions of incompetence. In low-income countries, stigma can be extreme, where some children with intellectual disability are chained, beaten, denied basic services, such as health services, education, or employment, and are even abandoned by their families (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020). As identified by Sonderlund et al. (2024), individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) face barriers to preventative health checks due to systematic failures at three levels. At the individual level, a lack of practitioner training and poor communication increases mistrust and anxiety among patients. Organizationally, there is a "time famine" or lack of time faced by practitioners, and structurally, the rigid funding models, geographical inaccessibility, and socioeconomic deprivation ultimately lead to a health equity gap.

4.2. Learning Disability: As Monica et al. 2022 identified, children with learning disabilities face marginalization

primarily through the "segregationist system" of special institutions. Educational institutions often misinterpret equal opportunities as providing identical conditions, such as the same textbooks. However, this actually creates inequality by failing to provide "differentiated education" and personalized intervention plans. Individuals with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) are often labelled as "stupid", "lazy", or "careless". The consequences of such labels are significant as higher levels of stigma has correlation with lower levels of self-esteem (Haft et al., 2022). The medical model treats these differences as "deficits" or "abnormalities" that need fixing, which leads to profound self-blame, self-hatred, and a persistent feeling of being "broken" (Peddigrew, 2023). Higher level of stigma is associated with less optimal outcomes, alongside poor academic performance, it increeases mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and reduce self-efficacy (Ritcher et al., 2022). The label of "learning disability" significantly reduces teachers' long term expectations for the long term achievement of the student, such as graduating, and they are more likely to recommend these students to a separate special school (Kashikar, 2026). There is a significant correlation between Specific Learning Disability (SLD) stigma and lower self-esteem, and stereotype threat undermines the self-efficacy and persistence of individuals with SLD (Haft et al., 2023).

4.3. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Autistic individuals similarly face a broad range of stigma based on their visible autistic characteristics. Public and professional misconceptions of ASD foster prejudice and discrimination (Turnock et al., 2022). In school settings, they are often misunderstood or socially rejected by their peers and teachers when they behave "differently" or struggle with communication (Davidson and Morales, 2023). A narrative review by Amate et al. (2025)

investigated the educational discrimination experienced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the findings, the global health crisis acted as a "magnifying glass" for the pre-existing structural weaknesses in inclusive education systems. The abrupt transition to remote learning disproportionately marginalized these students in four key dimensions: unequal access to digital resources, disruption of specialized services, impact on family dynamics, and institutional responses. Higher knowledge regarding the etiology and treatment of autism significantly predicts lower levels of stigma (Kitchin & Karlin, 2022). Parents of children with ASD often face familial shame and suspicions of child neglect, hence they refrain from disclosing their child's condition to others (Park et al., 2024).

In adulthood stigma remains in workplace settings and the community. Doyle et al (2022) conducted an international survey to understand how intersecting marginalizing identities such as gender, race, or sexuality create a compound adverse impact on autistic individuals at workplace. The survey reveals that stigma surrounding autism at workplace still remains, and white individuals in Western nations are heavily favoured in autism specific hiring. Within the workplace, marginalized groups such as women, transgender, and non-binary autistic employees report lower feelings of inclusion and higher pressure to hide their autistic traits.

4.4. Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): ADHD carries its own set of biases and misconceptions, which lead to discrimination throughout childhood and even in adulthood. Because ADHD involves inattention and hyperactivity, common people often mislabel it as being indisciplined or purposefully disruptive. Mueller et al (2012) highlight that stigmatization surrounding ADHD is largely driven by the uncertainty regarding the validity of the ADHD

diagnosis. People often do not understand the dangerousness associated with the disorders' externalising behaviors and blame the child or the parenting style for the condition. Adults with ADHD reports high level of public stigma, and they anticipate discrimination. Masuch et al (2019) found that 88.5% anticipated discrimination in daily life and 69.3% perceived public stigma, which were strongly associated with greater psychological distress, functional impairment, and lower quality of life. In schools and universities, labelled students are often treated as less capable than their performance actually suggests because teachers often limit them from opportunities (Metzger and Hamilton, 2020). These patterns contribute to marginalization. The labelling and misinterpretation causes under recognition of needs, barriers to education and employment, and reduced access to effective treatment.

4.5. Communication Disorders and Motor Disorders: Speech, language, and communication impairments are another source of stigma, not only in individuals diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder but also largely among the neurotypical population. Communication disorders significantly drive workplace discrimination and marginalization (Hasanbegovic & Kovacevic, 2019). Similarly, as motor disorders impact the physical abilities of a person, discrimination is also prevalent among people suffering from them. Gomes et al (2024) highlighted that Individuals with Tourette's syndrome face significant prejudice and marginalization, primarily driven by society's ignorance and unfamiliarity with the disorder. The involuntary motor and vocal tics characteristic of the condition, which can sometimes include abrupt movements or obscene gestures, often lead to alienation from people who do not know how to interact with them appropriately. Consequently, this widespread lack of

understanding creates deep barriers in social relationships and causes substantial social, academic, and professional harm to those living with the syndrome.

CONCLUSION

The review highlights that stigma, lack of awareness, and institutional barriers across education, healthcare, employment, and social environments contribute significantly to the exclusion experienced by neurodivergent individuals. Understanding marginalization through sociological and psychological frameworks emphasizes that many of these challenges arise not solely from the disorders themselves but from the social contexts in which individuals live. Promoting inclusive policies, increasing public awareness, and adopting a neurodiversity-informed perspective are therefore essential steps toward reducing stigma and fostering greater social participation and well-being for individuals with neurodevelopmental differences.

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Beyond Species Boundaries: Study of Power, Pain and Politics in Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Lubdhak*

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Abstract

Heidegger's fundamental ontology suggests that animals exist in a state of 'poverty' in the world, with limited access to their surroundings. This poverty stems from the animals' inability to apprehend the world's openness, which in turn diminishes their agency and reinforces human superiority. This persistent denial of animal agency in Western philosophy is part of a longstanding political fable that has distinguished humans from animals since the earliest days of civilization. This paper argues that animals, similar to marginalized humans, have limited access to their environment. The concept of 'zoe' or 'bare' biological life encompasses both peripheral humans and non-human animals, not treated as political subjects. According to Foucault, the operation of sovereignty has transformed with the shift from monarchical power to biopower in modern nation-states, but this shift hasn't altered the attitude of power toward 'bare life,' whose existence can be terminated without significant legal or ethical consequences. Derrida opines in *The Beast and the Sovereign* that any revolution against sovereignty would fail indefinitely until the demand is for the 'absence of sovereignty' instead of a fight for "a new form of the same fundamental structure". To transcend sovereignty, Derrida suggests, the sovereignty of the human

species must be challenged first. One needs to question the animal/human boundary on which sovereignty is founded. This paper invokes Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Lubdhak* to offer a vivid illustration of how power operates in the modern nation-state, affecting animals on the periphery. Bhattacharya, aligning with Derridean insights, interrogates sovereignty by acknowledging the non-exclusivity of humans. The animals in this story are often regarded as a metaphor for suppressed marginal people, but this oversimplified interpretation arises from the complex affinity between the two groups. United by their shared experience of pain and deprivation, if not by agency, marginal humans and animals become readily comparable metaphors for each other. Resistance, therefore, requires questioning the barrier between species and reimagining governance and ethics from the premise of species continuity.

Keywords: *Human-animal dynamics, marginality, bare life, ethics of animal treatment*

Introduction

I must admit that all ultimate problems cannot have ultimate answers, but we can at least be aware of the problem we have presented. We have touched the limits of our intelligence and we must stop here. (Panikkar, *Rhythm*, xxiii)

This observation by Raimon Panikkar, a theologian renowned for his work in interreligious dialogue, emerges while examining the intersection of time and its culmination. In his meditative examination of eschatology, Panikkar has reinforced the inherent limitations of human intelligence that, despite its vast potency fails, to anticipate the true nature of the creation's end. Therefore, through his cosmotheandric vision[1], he has prescribed a way of life that draws humanity into a deeper, unified relationship with both God and the

world because man, in isolation is nothing but an abstraction (Panikkar 2019, 18). Eschatology in cosmological thinking involves two factors, 'ecological holocaust' and 'biological suicide' (Phan and Ro, 2018, 247). Both the terms hint at a large-scale destruction of the environment and the lives that depend on it. But traditional religion has dedicated eschatology to the study of the final day of humanity on Earth. Panikkar (2019) says it is the 'greatest pitfall of all religions' to focus too much on the end of humanity (172). Dualistic thinking has restricted man to imagine the end of creation in terms of good and bad. In Hinduism, creation is not a static entity with unidirectional movement towards catastrophe; it is a cycle of ceaseless creation and destruction. The universe thrives on a balance between dualities, and whenever that balance is disturbed, a cosmic power intervenes to re-establish it. The end, however calamitous it may be, is always therefore an opening for the new. Jerry L. Walls (2007) explains the phenomenon,

> In such contexts, cosmic time is variously segmented. For example, fourteen ages of past and future sovereigns named Manu were titled manvantaras. Periods between dissolutions (kalpas) invoked the four dice throws of the early Vedas (krta, tretā, dvāpara, and kali) as four deteriorating world ages (yugas), always burdening the current time as the worst. But after annihilation and a long rest, the golden first age, the krta yuga, will return with cosmic order (dharma). Humans once again will be as wise and virtuous as they are strong. (180)

But the propositions of every religion are anthropocentric to the core. Their notions of *dharma/adharma*, *paap/punya*, are designed to determine the action of humans towards another human. Non-human entities remain neglected in discourses of religious ethics as objects to serve humans[2]. Can the balance of the universe, therefore, falter for abusing those who reside

at the margin of the speciesist structure? Can an apocalypse befall on Earth for the wrongs done towards nature and its silent beings?

Nabarun Bhattacharya (2006) has neither placed his faith in traditional theism nor in modern interfaith dialogues. He himself has turned the anthropocentric world upside down, so that the old structures that block the way of change fall apart. Bhattacharya, the flâneur of Bengali urban life, has witnessed from close quarters the systematic oppression of peripheral lives by those in power. By its nature, power is fluid and contextual; hence, the most vulnerable among humans can rightfully exert their dominance over nonhuman others in an anthropocentric setting. Therefore, the mute, voiceless, peripheral beings in Bhattacharya's altered world are not always humans, but sometimes animals. In *Lubdhak,* the animals rise to reclaim their right. The cruelty towards animals has cast a dark cloud over humanity, of which they are unaware. In the darkness of night, the animals are, therefore, parading out of the city, leaving the humans to suffer the consequences of their own *karma.* This paper aims to study *Lubdhak* as a subversive text of resistance that dismantles the hierarchical distinction between humans and non-humans. By giving voice to the marginal animals, Bhattacharya reminds the readers that humans are merely particles in a larger ecological system and any harm done to the system at large will be paid for with a cosmic consequence.

Are Animals Political Beings?

The foundation of Western political discourse is rooted in the exclusion of animal life from *polis*, thereby making politics a prerogative of humans only. With the upsurge of biopolitics, the human-animal equation has taken a sudden turn where the species distinction has narrowed down remarkably.

Foucault (1990) writes that Aristotle has presumed man as "a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence", but a "modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question" (143). In such assertions, the animals are not being granted a political life; instead, the human status is being relegated to that of an animal, blurring the difference that Western politics has made so prominent. Giorgio Agamben's (1998) idea of 'bare life' adds layers to this argument. The distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, with which Agamben initiates the discussion on 'bare life', is very much "species-specific" in nature. Responding to the argument of Foucault, Agamben states that sovereign and biopolitics, in some respect, are inherently similar in nature – they create an exception among subjects by suspending the authority's juridical responsibility towards them. This community of 'bare life', which is strictly human by species, is included within the system through exclusion.[3] People in concentration camps can be cited as a prime example of bare lives, whom Agamben refers to as "homo sacer". They are human animals from whom the privilege of being human is robbed. Constant dehumanization has reduced them to a state where animals become a regular metaphor for their existence, yet the distinction between humans and animals has not been totally abolished. Carlo Salzani (2022) prudently remarks,

> In the economy of Agamben's oeuvre, *The Open* and the question of the animal play a very specific role: that of understanding and describing, on the one hand, the mechanisms through which human life is "humanized" (i.e., how the human animal becomes Man) and, on the other, how the human can be and has been de-humanized, "animalized," and reduced to "bare life." In a sense, The Open is a continuation of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the book, published four years before,

> in which Agamben had focused on the biopolitical apparatuses that manage and control life—exemplified by the extreme paradigm of the concentration camp—and on the "non-human" core that endures at the very heart of the human. (xi)

The analogy between the status of animals and humans, suffering in a degraded state, applies to every historical incident marked by torture, brutality, and agony. Frequent comparisons of detention camps with slaughterhouses or factory farms emphasize the suffering of humans rather than animals, making the entire outlook anthropocentric in its roots. The lice, rats or stray dogs found in the accounts of human degradation are employed as symbols that make the inhumanity of the condition prominent to the readers. They are figurative animals, not real ones, hired to mime the woes of humans. Boria Sax (2000) alludes to *The Tin Drum* to exemplify its author's perspective problem. A massive political event like the Holocaust was difficult to ignore in a post-Second World War period, but addressing the issue directly would have affected the aesthetics of writing. Therefore, Günter Grass chose to focus on 'alienated people' in his work, like the dwarf Oscar Manzereth, who did not have any known affiliation in the Third Reich (17). Thus, the author eluded the necessity of commenting on both the power at centre and people at concentration camps, despite setting the plot in Nazi Germany. Gunter Grass is just one such name. Boria Sax critiques the attitude of literary personas who intend to keep a psychic distance from politically charged events,

> Literature has always been used to confront problems obliquely when intellectual, emotional, or practical constraints prevent us from addressing them in a more direct way; it is a means of stepping back from events and gaining objectivity. (16)

Nabarun Bhattacharya isn't the one who shies away from the realities of life. With his radical leftist mindset, he exposes the nexus of power and corruption. The chaotic underbelly of the city in *Kangal Malshat*, the contemptible complacency of upper-middle class in *Harbart*, the sleazy lanes where prostitutes reside in "Foyarar Jonyo Duschinta", have never been so unapologetically confronted as in Bhattacharya's writings. He shatters the beguiling illusions with which capitalism and consumerism have blinded the populace and puts his faith in revolution. Fyatarus or choktars are figures from the subalterns who lead the uprising against the bourgeoisie. The fyatarus can fly. They urinate and scatter rubbish in public places, destroy properties, spoil dinner parties, rob moneyed families, and dismantle, in every way possible, the scaffold that the elites have constructed for society.

The extreme left mind set of Bhattacharya has prevented him from acknowledging the hierarchy in social strata, but it is due to the true spirit of an anti-structuralist that he also defies the species-specific hierarchy that is deeply rooted in humans. He believed that the power dynamics in every domain shall be contested, whether it is the bourgeoisie, from an economic perspective, or humans, from a biological one. Bhattacharya, in *Lubdhak,* has exposed the striking similarity between stray dogs and humans in detention camps, not in a figurative way but with attentive precision that forces the readers to imagine the dogs as humans. Suffering makes man and animal cry aloud alike, Jeremy Bentham has said.[4] Therefore, the lives rotting in *pinjrapole* are not dissimilar to those bodies huddled together in concentration camps. The role of State in both cases is similar, but humans choose to react to the latter only. Humans pushed to the fringes by society, or exploited by those in power, often inflict brutality

towards the so-called inferior species. Humans believe it comes within their right to harm non-human beings without committing a crime. To devalue the lives of non-human others is the norm for humans, just like a sovereign devalues the lives of its human subjects. The resistance against power-privileges should also be resistance against species-hierarchy. Voices must unite against every form of torture inflicted on every being, otherwise, all reformations will end up being new appearances of old structures.

Derrida's (2010) deconstructionist perspective also suggests a revolution that would transgress the species boundaries. Derrida contends that human revolts throughout history have hitherto failed because they did not intend to dismantle all aspects of the existing system. To explain his argument, Derrida alludes to 'a famous story' that Henry F. Ellenberger mentions in "The Mental Hospital and the Zoological Garden". In 1681, Louis XIV, the Sun King, who is famous for his patronage of anatomical studies, decreed the dissection of a giant elephant under his observance. "Never perhaps was there a more imposing anatomical dissection, judged by the enormity of the animal, by the precision with which its several parts were examined, or by the quality and number of assistants" (*Beast*, 392). Derrida studies this unusual event as an occasion where the beast and the sovereign face one another in a macabre condition to produce scientific knowledge. As a second instance, Derrida refers to the Versailles menagerie, which was demolished during the French Revolution, not due to the realization that animals must not be caged as objects or those they, too, have rights to freedom, but because animals shouldn't be privileged when humans were suffering (393). Derrida observes that in both instances, it is not the Sovereign that relegates the Beast to an object but a general structure that has its predetermined

orientation. The dissection of animals for anatomy lessons regularly takes place for the sake of knowledge, but usually they "unfold(s) under the authority of an Academy of Sciences, itself created, like the Académie française, by a sovereign monarch. To whom it remains very docilely subjected" (*Beast,* 404). For Derrida, the destruction of the menagerie of Versailles was another instance of reinstatement of the same order, "since Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, who was the intendant of the King's Garden, had the debris transported and proposed that a new establishment be founded" (405). A new paradigm can never be erected on the debris of the old.

In alignment with Derrida, Nabarun Bhattacharya prescribes an overturning shift in the existing societal structures, which would compel humans to regard nature and non-human beings as 'messmates', an association Donna Haraway (2013) suggested[5]. *Lubdhak* envisions a catastrophic conclusion for the anthropomorphic universe where stray dogs have risen to revolt against humanity and are leaving the city en masse. Humans have invented and employed heinous techniques to get rid of dogs, and now, the cosmos has plans to erase humans from Earth's surface. The 'bare lives' have risen to power from periphery.

Dogs in India:

In India, dogs are ubiquitous beings – or so it seems, as Bibek Debroy's reckonings tell a different tale. Regarding stray dogs, India shares a common opinion with many other developed and developing countries – dogs pose a threat to human safety. These nasty creatures, therefore, must be managed by curbing their numbers. Debroy documents the number of dogs since 1982, the year when dogs were included in livestock census, showing an apparent growth in their numbers over time, but a steady decline in annual average

increase rate. Debroy notes that due to under-reporting, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has calculated the number of dogs as 50 million in 2008, which makes the "dog/human ratio of approximately 1:20". Debroy claims that in most of the developed countries "this ratio is between 1:6 and 1:10" (223). Interestingly, of the total stray dog population in India, rural areas contribute "23.19 million to the dog population, while urban India contributes 2.29 million" (223), making the stray dog issue evidently urban. Debroy remarks that in rural or semi-urban areas,

> Dogs are never anonymous, and at best, they are semi-strays and semi-pets, with some form of collective ownership. It is in urban society, no matter how primitive, that the tension between humans and stray dogs becomes palpable. (208)

Driven by kindness, faith, or fellow feeling, stray cattle are fed and respected in India, which has been the tradition of ancient times, but the modernized, urban cities desire to adopt a different outlook. A survey conducted by Arti Sharma and Tejbir Singh Rana (2009) in the rural districts of Aligarh shows how local people appreciate and acknowledge the diversity of animals, plants, shrubs, birds, and insects around them, with their daily lives intricately linked to the preservation of surrounding flora and fauna. "Cows are the most respected and fed animal among the respondents of Aligarh District" (264), writes Sharma and Rana, "63.75% of respondents reported that they give bread to cows every day. The next most-fed animals are dogs: 57.5% of respondents reported that they feed dogs whenever there is excess food in their home" (264). The availability of food, though, depends on the willingness of the family, their economic condition, and the number of members, but it at least reflects their compassion and empathy towards non-human beings. Sharma and Rana

have observed, the attitude of these district people towards animals alters when money comes into play. Humans tend to domesticate only those animals whose by-products have monetary worth, and when the financial benefit terminates, the necessity of domestication also ends.[6] In the case of dogs, the need for domestication often arises from a desire for companionship, extending family bonds, maintaining social status, or keeping intruders away. As a result, dogs often fall out of favour as they age. But the problem is not strictly with the feral animals; stray dogs have always been a hassle for developing India. British colonists have documented policies to confront this nuisance, which disturbed their otherwise comfortable lives. In 1813, a regulation was introduced by Bombay municipality to cull stray dogs in public and government places that pose a threat to human safety. The British dog catchers were paid eight annas for every dog, which was enough to motivate them to kill every dog they encountered anywhere. As a result, many of the peaceful, doted-upon dogs, who have become an integral member of a community, were killed mercilessly. Problems arose with the method of killing also, as dogs were being killed in sweltering summer, and the carcasses were left along the streets. This heartless drive infuriated every religious community, the Parsi community in particular, ensuing immediate protests that are renowned in history as the Bombay Dog Riots of 1832. [7]The Parsi-led protest surely was a surprise to the British administrators, who had not anticipated a revolt over hunting down stray dogs. Jesse S. Palsetia, in her essay *Mad Dogs and Parsis: The Bombay Dog Riots of 1832,* uncovers the reason that had moved the otherwise civic-minded and peace-loving Parsis to riot. "Hindus and Jains held the caring for and feeding of stray dogs and other living creatures as an act of piety and religious merit" (18), writes Palsetia. But

for Parsis, "Zoroastrian eschatology held the dog to be the guardian of the Bridge of Judgement or Chinvat, before which every Zoroastrian is judged following death, and the faithful companion of the righteous across the Bridge to paradise" (15). Undoubtedly, religious scrupulosity was the stimulus behind the riot; still, human compassion towards non-human others was the official cause of the protest. Anyways, such protests on humanitarian grounds were not, of course, a unanimous response. Just a few years before this riot, in 1926, Gandhi published a series of eight Gujarati articles in *Navajivan*, which later got published in English as *Is This Humanity?* The articles uphold his views on ahimsa towards cattle and animals, with some exceptions. Gandhi's animal ethics is termed as 'progressive ahimsaist'[8] as it approves of violence in select situations where human security is under threat. The matter of stray dogs inevitably falls into this category.

A wealthy trader from Ahmedabad, who was also a good friend of Gandhi's, gave an order to kill sixty stray dogs roaming on his factory premises. The Ahmedabad Humanitarian League, protesting against this inhumane act, sent Gandhi a letter, to which he responded vividly, giving due seriousness to the issue of stray dogs. In Gandhi's opinion, "Stray dogs do not drop down from heaven. They are a sign of the idleness, indifference and ignorance of society. When they grow into a nuisance, it is due to our ignorance and want of compassion" (Debroy, *Sarama*, 190) Those who take the pleasure of feeding stray dogs must also shoulder the responsibility of providing shelter to them, argues Gandhi, else they might wander about creating a menace. A city dweller commits no crime in killing a stray dog which is a potential threat to his family safety, rather they who are feeding them are committing a sin – "It is a sin, it should be a sin, to feed stray dogs, and we should save numerous

dogs if we had legislation making every stray dog liable to be shot" (188). Gandhi further added that dogs, whether in villages or cities, must not wander ownerlessly; for those who suffer with compassion should spend a part of their income to provide shelter and care to these dogs, and if they are unable to do so, then they would have to witness the dogs being shot passively (188). Even *pinjrapole* was not a viable option for Gandhi. The free movement of stray dogs has to be restricted, by any means, for the sake of society.

> If we persist in keeping stray dogs undisturbed, we shall soon be faced with the duty of either castrating them or killing them. A third alternative is that of having a special pinjrapole for dogs. But it is out of the question. When we cannot cope with all the stray cattle in the city, the very proposal of having a pinjrapole for dogs seems to me to be chimerical. (*Sarama*, 172)

Fortunately, the Indian legislative system did not consider stray dogs as hazardous a presence as Gandhi did. Article 51A(g) of the Indian Constitution asks every citizen to have compassion for living creatures. Since October 6 1860, under Sections 428 and 429 of the Indian Penal Code, anyone who consciously kills, poisons, or maims animals is liable to face punishment. However, these sections do not cover the stray dogs directly as they specifically refer to animals having monetary worth. Section 11 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act extends protection to every wild and domestic animal, including stray dogs, and Section 11(i) penalizes those who abandon animals to pain, suffering and starvation. [9] Bibek Debroy notes that over time, the law has adopted a more humane approach towards stray dogs,

> Since 1992, municipalities can no longer kill stray dogs. There must instead be a sterilization and ABC (Animal

> Birth Control) programme and the Animal Welfare Board has a code of conduct for municipalities. These principles have also been upheld by assorted high courts. Nor can stray dogs be used for research. After all, it costs less to sterilize than to euthanize. (*Sarama*, 192)

A report by the Press Information Bureau, India, on the latest national-level livestock census, conducted in 2019, endorses Debroy's observation on the nation's stance towards stray dogs,

> …the States are mandated to arrange the shelters and kanji house to control the stray animals population. Further, the Central Government has framed Rules for Animal Birth Control (Dogs) to control the dog population. It is the duty of the Local Bodies (sic) are mandated to implement the ABC Programme in their respective localities as per provisions of the Rules. (MoFAHD, 2022, 1)

It is no surprise, therefore, that Nabarun Bhattacharya has chosen dogs as the subject of his text where creatures relegated to the margins rise up to assert their rightful claim. Dogs are not just an ordinary nuisance in the city; they pose a potential threat to an urbanizing society that aspires to global status without self-reflection. They are simultaneously a challenge to the state-power that claims to have achieved greatness for its people. The increasing number of stray dogs nullifies their claims, exposing the shortcomings of urban development. For Bhattacharya, therefore, stray dogs have become a radical instrument of revolt, symbolizing resistance against the societal and national narratives that marginalize them. In the city's filthy corners, cemeteries, brothels, and dingy lanes where respectable humans dare not tread, stray dogs unite with outcasts.

A Parable of Dogs

Kolkata is teetering on the brink of calamity, and the narrator is counting down the imminent moment. *Lubdhok* unfurls as a ticking bomb, ready to explode. With only seven hours left in their life, humans stand powerless to the forces of time. Ironically, the most powerful of all animals, who dared to disturb the design of nature, will succumb to sleep in these final hours, which Time (Kāla) will seal with an eternal one. The narrator, intermittently, reminds us of the ticking of time. Seven hours, or four hundred and twenty minutes, or twenty-five thousand and two hundred seconds – what significance do they have when the entire city is going to get destroyed in a single blow from Time (Kāla) itself? Bhattacharya catalogues the catastrophic earthquakes in recent history which have claimed numerous lives before the invention of Richter scale. Yet, throughout history, the loss of lives has always been counted with regard to humans only, which emphasizes the insignificance of other lives on Earth. Nabarun contends that whenever the value of life is contemplated, it inevitably recalls the image of humans. For instance, street crossings or public vehicles sometimes display warnings, cautioning traffic to be mindful of their movements on the road because every life is important. The life in discussion is unmistakably human; everyone knows. Still, it has to be put up publicly, perhaps to make the disregard for other non-humans more pronounced. All the slogans of rallies, promises of ministers, emotions of poets, lectures of scholars tend to focus on lives, which are of humans only. What about the countless other lives that exist in front and around us? They are everywhere, still somehow invisible. If the piercing cries of a stray dog cannot move a poet's pen, how can their silence command attention? The city, therefore, has not noticed that the dogs are not heard anymore. The cacophony of city life barely makes the silence

of stray dogs' audible, but those who are attuned to the darkness of the city have noticed: dogs are leaving Kolkata.

Kolkata, a city of simmering lights, has traded its soul in a Faustian bargain. In an attempt to upgrade its status on global platforms, the city is busy draping a metropolitan look. The hollow, lifeless interiors of its inhabitants are being shrouded by glossy metals. The street dogs, swarming the chequered lanes of the town, are hindering the urbanisation. With its increased human population, garbage, and pollution, the city desires to rise the ladder of development without a soul. The stray dogs are therefore being effaced from the alleys. The municipal corporation is having periodical meetings to adopt the most convenient method of annihilation. Meanwhile, the citizens have started shouldering the responsibility themselves. Sporadic events were at first getting reported from various parts of the city on abusing stray dogs. Initially, such reports could not draw general attention because animal abuse is a regular practice, but the resemblance in their nature forces one to think of them as the initiation of a greater unfolding plan. Kangojano, a stray she-dog, was lured to a household premise by the scent of food one morning. While she was distracted, searching for the source of the smell, muriatic acid was thrown at her from behind iron bars. Sensing an impending danger, she instinctively waved her head aside, but that was not enough to save her entirely – the acid seared one of her ears. The narrator has named this black dog Kangojano, seeing her resilience. On that fateful morning, the dog rushed to a nearby poodle and dipped her affected ear in it. Perhaps there was some mysterious property in that mud and water that nursed her ear temporarily. As time passed, the sun and the rain helped to sprout another ear-like organ from the affected place.

The next victim was a white stray dog, Sadate. It appeared to be an accident at first, as stray dogs get regularly hit by flashing cars in a 'developing' city, but the narrator's attentive observation revealed the sinister intent lurking behind. Sadate was a weak and timid dog who used to cross roads with cautious and composed feet. One fine morning, a speeding car hit the dog while it was crossing the street and fled. The force of the car was such that the body flew to the other side of the road divider. It was a clean, shining car with sharp calculation because the pace of Sadate was impossible to go unnoticed unless he was targeted for it. The narrator only wished to see whether the blood and matter of the dog's brain could tint the car's cleanliness. The third incident happened to a mother with four children. Perhaps the multiplication of dogs was not seen favourably by humans; therefore, on a chilling dawn, the four puppies were almost drenched to death. Surprisingly, the little lives, chilled to their bones, survived this attack. Seeing them frolicking with each other, no one could imagine the kind of pain they had endured a few hours ago. Their recovery agitated the assailant so much that the next day, a large brick chunk was hurled towards them. The chunk missed its target that day, but Patkile, the mother, could easily decipher the sign it bore. She moved away with her children from those lanes.

The offences against dogs by common city dwellers increased over time, yet they seemed to appear as isolated events. Some suspicious movements were also noticed among dogs. Abandoning popular markets, common crossings, posh lanes, and broad highways, they were taking refuge in hospital backyards, dingy slums, garbage stacks, and desolate corners. Some new dogs were being noticed scouting in various areas. Keen eyes did not fail to realise that they had come to convey some message, before swiftly fleeing. Strangely, these

newcomers were being met with reverence by local dogs, which is very uncanine in nature. One who paid attention to the subtleties of the city was aware that dogs were uniting against humans. The governing body of the city was oblivious to this insurgency. Meanwhile, Municipal Corporation had undertaken the responsibility of dog eviction. All their knowledge and intelligence were being wasted in inventing the most diplomatic, economical, eco-friendly, and ethical way of annihilating stray dogs. The amount of gravity and reason that men were deploying after dogs was ridiculous. It seemed that more than human problems like, illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, human trafficking, prostitution, stray dogs have become a challenging menace to society. Under these circumstances, few proposed direct shootings, while another group asked to provide poisoned meat to the dogs at night. In the committee's discussion, the cruelty inflicted on beggars and the poor during the period of the Brazilian Miracle was also referenced for inspiration. Young dogs and puppies, in their suggestion, were to be targeted first because they will produce future nuisances. Hence, just the way a few ex-military men were hired by gold merchants of Brazil to evict poor children from the Brazilian streets, men should be appointed to kill puppies first. In another suggestion, the treatment of Jews by Nazis was recapitulated. First, dogs have to be located and brought into concentration camps. Next, gas vans will be set outside to exhaust carbon monoxide through pipes into chambers, which will approximately suffocate the dogs to death in around forty minutes. The time can be reduced to fifteen minutes through hydrogen cyanide, as several systematic killing operations in recent history have proven its efficacy. In the last step, the dead dogs in chamber can be burned down in pits without much delay. The entire plan of action pleased many from the

committee but was rejected due to its association with Nazis. It would be better, in that case, to follow the mark of the British colonialists who used to employ natives as dog-catchers. Thus, the municipality could also curb their costs because an entire department with its out-of-use appliances still existed and only a little refurbishment would make it function. The committee finally agreed unanimously to renovate existing *pinjrapoles* and build new ones, if necessary, to ensure the project's success.

Soon, the effects of the dog-hunt programme became apparent. Dogs, wherever found, were being viciously dragged into vans and then transported to *pinjrapoles*. Bhattacharya produces an evocative illustration of the wretched condition of pinjrapoles where hundreds of dogs were being heaped upon one another. His careful rendering of the mutilated canine bodies can confuse readers with those of sprawled, emaciated human bodies found in concentration camps. Karal Kasak, a Czech prisoner working on Freiland II illustration, has documented secretly the miserable condition of nearly two hundred Jews surviving in the plantation. The Jews were made to work with open wounds, and most of them could not even stand on their feet. Wachsmann (2015) quotes from the diaries of Kasak on May 9, 1941,

> Again they have put a group of lifeless and unconscious Jews on the cart. Human flesh, the bodies of these sons of God, stacked like logs, arms and legs swaying limply—a horrendous picture that we witness daily… (33)

The *pinjrapoles* were similarly being stacked with canine bodies, which were left there to rot without food or water. One could count one hundred and seventeen bodies of different sexes and ages piled together. The expressions on

their faces suggested that many, except for a few, had accepted their death silently. Sufferance can be taught, the narrator states, and this observation applies to both dogs and humans. The narrator draws on the shuttle box experiment[10], where the dog initially jumps from one compartment to the other to escape discomfort but, after a period, gradually succumbs to silent endurance. Wachsmann, in a similar tone, recounts the silence of the inmates of concentration camps,

> Their broken teeth, battered bodies, and terrified silences were often more revealing than words; it could take months for visible injuries to heal, and some victims never recovered. (68)

But Nabarun Bhattacharya has never indulged in endurance. All his writings have been burning testaments of resistance. With the awareness that a reckless, greedy, exploitative human society will finally lead to self-destruction, he has always believed that the oppressed will rise to power. Long exposure to abuse can numb the sentience of any living being, but cannot sterilize it forever. A cataclysmic reaction is mandated by history after prolonged endurance. Following the directive of time, the table turned, making the dominant ones most vulnerable. After a ravaging pursuit, the dog-hunt suddenly lost momentum. With multiple engagements at hand, which were all related to humans and their well-being, the municipality failed to notice the reduced numbers of dogs being deported to *pinjrapoles*. Surprisingly, like many humans who went into hiding during the Third Reich, the stray dogs in *Lubdhaka* decided to hide in wastes and deserted places. The dog catchers could only find groups of elderly dogs at crossroads, who sat indifferently amidst city broils. To everyone's amazement, they surrendered to the dog catchers easily and proceeded towards the dog vans voluntarily with a learned composure. This unnatural change in canine

behaviour sparked interest in scientists, who proposed placing the elderly dogs separately in the first *pinjrapole* for study. It seemed that the dogs were observing some strong austerity; heat, hunger, thirst, fatigue – not even death could affect their stern composure. At night, they were noticed raising their forelimbs towards Canis Major in the sky, in the gesture of prayer, and their tongues moved incessantly. This uncanny attitude perplexed the scientists, who could not logically explain any of these behaviours. Science, through experiments and dissection, has claimed to know all about dogs, but the collective resistance that they were exhibiting proved that science was yet to decipher many mysteries of the world.

Escaping the sight of the humans, stray dogs started uniting in abandoned tram depots, milk booths, transformer rooms, garages, graveyards, and all those filthy, dingy, narrow spaces of the city where humans dare not tread. They have been informed by dog messengers that some terrible change of event is to take place. Just as W. B. Yeats (1989), moved by the bloody upsurge in Ireland, prophesied, "Surely, some revelation is at hand"[11], the dog messengers prophesied the advent of a mythical being, Anubis. In Egyptian belief, Anubis, the God with the head of the jackal, guides the souls to the afterlife, weighing their deeds. The guardian of the dead soul has stepped on earth to escort the dogs to a distant land beyond human cruelty. He had come as the emissary of the Shadow Dogs. As Yeats' antichrist is born out of *spiritus mundi* or world-spirit, Anubis has emerged from Shadow Dogs, who are the collective spirits of all those dogs whom humans have abused. The stray dogs from their hideaways can see the Shadow Dogs running across the length of the sky with every streak of lightning. Their cosmic movement prepares the mortal dogs for exodus. Their exodus is a testament to

inclusivity, where, unlike humans, the vulnerable, weak and wounded are cradled with support and care. With each suffering group of dogs, an Anubis emerges, with eyes blazing fiercely to avenge the human race. The collaborative sound of their claws scraping against *pinjrapoles* was enough to pierce the authority's pride, who finally conceded to open the gates of *pinjrapoles* out of fear.

In the closing hours, a flood of stray dogs has clogged every pavement, road and highway of Kolkata. The day of dogs has finally arrived, when human movements in the town are thwarted by canine creatures swarming everywhere. Dogs of different colour, size, age, and pattern are moving out of the city with an unknown enthusiasm and determination. Not lured by any pied piper but with the knowledge of an imminent danger that would destroy the city, the dogs are leaving. Bhattacharya, in this section, has made the young dogs address humans directly. Regional, national, and even international media have come to cover the unforeseen event that Kolkata is witnessing, and with them has started the game of accusations, speculations, and examinations. But amidst all the human broils, this section is designed as a letter that the young dogs are leaving for humans in Kolkata. It airs the dogs' frustration, grievances, and to some extent, pity for humans because human intelligence is unable to fathom what is chasing their future. The little ones themselves are not sure of what is happening and where exactly they are heading. But they are at least sure that humans are behind everything. Therefore, they warn the policemen, drivers, vendors and every onlooker who stands beside their procession to maintain a safe distance from their track; otherwise, their silent march would boil over into violent aggression, destroying everything. Lubdhaka or Sirius, to whom the old dogs in the first *pinjrapole* have prayed till the last hour of calamity, has

sent his verdict. A planetoid will be hurled upon Kolkata within seven hours, which will wipe out the city with all its false signs of development. The dog overseers will ensure that by these hours, the dogs secure a safe distance from the city, and Kolkata meets its end as a consequence of its deed.

Conclusion

The dogs, appearing in literature, are often read as metaphors for filthy, despicable beings[12], but Bhattacharya himself has noted at the outset of *Lubdhak* that this tale is dedicated to dogs, and is about dogs (Foreword to *Lubdhak*). Bhattacharya has commemorated his childhood companion Gypsy and all other birds, fish, and cats, who have prepared him to see the world from a non-human perspective. His intimacy with non-humans has ignited an understanding that the earth doesn't belong to humans only. Other non-human beings have their right to everything that man considers his own. The more humans ignore this truth, the closer they edge toward their destruction. *Lubdhak* is a parable of real dogs with real pains; whatever remains fantastic in the story is the cosmic aid that seals the human destiny with an immediate calamity. But even without those chimaeras, the final outcome for humans would not have been much different. In *Lubdhak,* Bhattacharya has gone to great lengths to place animals, specifically dogs in this case, in close proximity to humans. His attribution of human language to dogs has not emanated from a desire to maintain an anthropocentric perspective, but rather from a desire to demolish that instrument of species hierarchy that has kept animals away from the human *polis*. Only when animals become a part of the *polis* will a genuine resistance from the margins take place.

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Endnotes

1 Cosmotheandrism refers to a vision of Raimon Panikkar that believes in the coalescence of three elements of reality - universe (cosmos), God (Theos) and the human (Anthropos). The intersubjectivity of three dimensions constructs the whole universe. Panikkar's conception of the new Trinity has included cosmos actively in the discourse of spirituality, which, in turn, aids Panikkar to address the ecological problems from a spiritual perspective.

2 Humans are often held accountable for their actions towards certain animals, which are considered sacred by some religion, like the cow in Hinduism. But these offenses and the penance they invite are inherently anthropocentric in nature, designed to serve human interests. Animals, as subjects, have no special

place in religious ethics because the concept of good and evil starts with consciousness and animals, in anthropocentric beliefs, are bereft of it. Von Hartmann (1893) speaks of three stages of moral development - the natural or the beast, the moral and the super-moral. The concept of morality and immorality, he contends, is associated with the last two stages, where consciousness prevails. Every human action, whether moral or immoral, therefore, leads the universe towards its end, that is, the extinction of consciousness,

3 Vint, Sherryl (2010, November). Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower. *Science Fiction Studies*, 37(3), p. 445.

4 Jeremy Bentham, a nineteenth-century English philosopher, has spoken about the moral status of animals in society. Though it cannot be claimed that the idea he conceived could decenter humans from the center of discussion, but, regarding animal abuse, he has taken an ethical stand. claiming it does not matter whether animals can reason or talk like humans. If they can suffer, that is enough to abate humans from inflicting pain on them. As sentient beings, the suffering of humans and animals is not dissimilar. (143)

5 Haraway explains that the genesis of the word 'companion' is rooted in Latin *cum panis*, which means "with bread". She contends that messmates, of different character and identity, become companions at table. The food and resources bring them together from diverse ends. Similarly, belonging from the same species only enables animals to interbreed reprodively. Animals from these species are destined to "live and die" together as messmates, dining at the same table. (17-18)

6 *Making Cities Resilient*. (2019). Germany: Springer International Publishing, p.265.

7 Debroy, B. (2008). *Sarama and Her Children: The Dog in Indian Myth*. Penguin Books, p. 191.

8 The term "progressive ahimsaist" was used by Gandhi himself in the context of dog killing. According to him, a progressive ahimsaist will adopt violence only when their own existence or those under their care are under threat. The problem of dogs can,

therefore, be dealt with violence only after 'mature deliberation' and when it becomes obligatory (10).

9 Fasel, D. R. N., & Butler, D. S. C. (2023). *Animal Rights Law*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 142.

10 A shuttle box is a piece of apparatus used for animal learning experiments. It is divided into two halves, and the animal within is encouraged to move between the compartments to gain a reward or avoid a negative stimulus, such as electric shocks. Sometimes, there is a small barrier between the two compartments, and the animal must jump over or push past it to move between them.

11 Yeats, W. B. (1989). The Second Coming. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats,* United States: Collier Books.

12 In her book *On Hinduism*, Wendy Doniger (2014) has dedicated a chapter to discuss stories, from *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and Sanskrit epics, where dogs are treated as metaphors of marginalized human communities. Contemporary works like J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Tamil poet Gnanakoothan's 'Dog' also use canine beings and their sufferings as metaphors of human vulnerability and disempowerment.

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Becoming the Other: Simone de Beauvoir and the Gendered Marginalisation of Rita Welinkar

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Abstract

This chapter critically reads the gendered marginalisation of the eponymous protagonist of *Rita Welinkar* (1995) adopting Simone de Beauvoir's lens put forth in *The Second Sex*. Rita Welinkar, a forty plus single woman in Bombay is denied her selfhood on the grounds of her femininity. Opening in a hospital where Rita is undergoing treatment for her nervous breakdown, the storyline unfolds through an extended letter she writes to her childhood friend, Saraswati, in which she reconstructs the gendered architecture of her adult life. The chapter illuminates Rita's marginalisation in the novel adopting Simone de Beauvoir's interlinked concepts of femininity as social construction, immanence versus transcendence, and the complicity of women in each other's Othering. The specific episodes of Rita's alterity in the text are studied under the following interlocking gendered axes to bring coherence and rigour to the analysis: the social illegitimacy of her unmarried status,

the perpetual surveillance of her body, the denial of any legitimate social existence to her sexuality outside patriarchal structures, and the policing of her selfhood by women who have internalised their own Otherness. Finally, the nervous breakdown in the novel is not seen as a point of defeat, but as a threshold; one from which the constructed Other gradually begins to emerge as a subject.

Keywords*: Othering, gendered marginalisation, immanence, benevolent sexism, Simone de Beauvoir, Shanta Gokhale*

Introduction

Rita Welinkar (1995), written by Shanta Gokhale, is a novel translated from the original Marathi to English by the author herself. It tells the story of its eponymous protagonist – a forty plus single, middle-class woman who is marginalised by her family and the society. The eldest of four siblings, Rita Welinkar (henceforth: Rita) takes on the responsibility of providing for her family after her father unexpectedly loses his job. Rita is in a romantic relationship with a married man for over fifteen years. When she asks him to openly acknowledge their relationship, he not only refuses to do so, but gives the situation a spin such that it appears what he does is for Rita's good. Rita bears it all, but the accumulated tension of years erupts in the form of a nervous breakdown. The novel opens here with Rita undergoing treatment at a psychiatric hospital for her frayed nerves.

Rita Welinkar is not a novel of dramatic, violent oppression. It is an intimate, everyday portrayal of the myriad ways in which a woman's selfhood is slowly chipped away by the demands of family, social expectations and a clandestine relationship. It is a novel that showcases a protagonist who has spent over fifteen years being everything to everybody, and being nothing to her own self.

This sidelining of the protagonist's self in the novel brought on by societal norms and her romantic relationship is the focus of study of this chapter. We take up Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2010) as the theoretical apparatus to understand the protagonist's marginalisation and its implications on her selfhood and identity. Beauvoir's foundational argument that one is not born a woman, but becomes woman, and that this very becoming is the process of construction of the Other against which man defines himself as a subject, is an illuminating light that brings out the nuances of the novel's storyline as it unfolds. This chapter traces Rita's gendered marginalisation through Beauvoir's framework and argues that Rita's nervous breakdown is not her nadir in life, but the threshold: it is that space through which the hitherto Othered Rita pulls herself together and sets about on a life that reclaims that very Othered self.

Beauvoir's Framework: Becoming the Other

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 330). This sentence, perhaps the most significant in twentieth century feminist thought, declares Beauvoir's central argument: femininity is not a biological given, but is a social construction that emerges from a systematic denial of woman's capacity for autonomous selfhood. Drawing from Aristotle and Saint Thomas, Beauvoir presents the following picture of woman: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man […]; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute. She is the Other" (26). Thus, the construction of femininity and the construction of Otherness are, for Beauvoir, the same process.

Central to this argument is Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence. Transcendence

refers to the human capacity to project oneself toward future possibilities. It entails pursuing ambitions, creating meaning through action etc. Immanence, on the contrary, is the condition of being confined to the repetitive and the relational; it is existing for others rather than for oneself. Beauvoir's argument is that societal norms deliberately and consistently assign women to immanence, while reserving transcendence for men (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 37). Women are made to structure their lives around the needs of fathers, husbands and children, thereby obliterating their own desires. In cases when a woman strives towards transcendence, she is very conveniently seen as transgressive and incomprehensible.

A third aspect of Beauvoir's framework taken up in this chapter is what she calls women's complicity in the Othering of women around them. Beauvoir astutely recognises that patriarchal structures stand tall not just due to the efforts of men; women too contribute to the perpetuation of these norms. In her own words: "To refuse to be the Other, to refuse complicity with man, would mean for women to renounce all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 30). Women who have over time internalised their own Othering, very often enforce it on other women. Ranging from judgment to social pressure to policing of deviance from prescribed femininity, this brand of Othering can take many shapes. This complicity practiced by women may be seen as a psychological consequence of being made to bear the burden of the patriarchal structures.

Finally, Beauvoir anticipates what Glick and Fiske (1996) would later term benevolent sexism -- the very shrewd exercise of control over women through apparent care rather than overt hostility (Beauvoir, 1949/2010, 30 & 161). These are instances when men manage women's existence in ways that benefit them while presenting this management as

the women's welfare. This form of Othering is particularly effective because of the veneer it comes with, which makes naming it difficult. The implication is that this Othering hardly ever is seen as hostile; instead, it is seen myopically by the women themselves as an act of love. This concept plays out in Rita's relationship with Vitthal Salvi as will be discussed in the forthcoming sections.

While Beauvoir was writing about mid-twentieth century France, the structures she identifies translate very well to the late twentieth century Bombay middle-class milieu Gokhale depicts. According marriage the prime place for the social legitimacy of women, the denial of female ambition and sexuality -- these are not cultural or insular manifestations of patriarchal oppression, but universal patriarchal structures that take on different local hues. A close reading of the novel, as will be seen in this chapter, demonstrates that Beauvoir's framework is not particularly imposed from outside as an act of literary criticism, but it is something that reveals itself from within Gokhale's storytelling.

That said, transposing Beauvoir's framework onto an Indian context without a critical mediation runs the risk of flattening the specificities of the social conditions within which Rita's Othering is produced. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) is accordingly taken as a complementary companion to Beauvoir. Interestingly, Menon begins her first chapter titled Family in the book thus: "There is zero tolerance for those who breach the carefully produced 'natural' order of society by refusing to conform to norms of looks and behaviour" (3). This chapter indeed takes up for analysis Rita's 'looks and behaviour' that render her a deviant on societal terms. Menon's seminal work interrogates the specific ways in which this comes to be. Her argument that feminist politics in India must contend with an especially dense network

of kinship obligations, community surveillance, and the policing of female sexuality within structures of respectability directly maps onto the world of *Rita Welinkar*. Menon specifically says if what is considered normal in the society (for example, Rita being married would have been normal) had been natural, then it would not require a vast network of controls to keep in place (Menon, 2012, 93). It thus follows that, Rita's marginalisation is thus not a function of not being married in the abstract, but is produced by the specific social grammar of Bombay's middle-class milieu where a woman of her age and background is simply seen as having failed at the task of being a woman. One can therefore argue that the choices Rita makes (and does not make) in the novel are not entirely indicative of her personality or psychology. Instead, it makes better sense to read her life situation being a result of the effects of the patriarchal society in which she is located. Thus, juxtaposing Menon with Beauvoir allows this chapter to hold two things simultaneously: Beauvoir's account of the universal mechanism by which women are constructed as Other, and Menon's grounding of that construction within the particular social and familial arrangements that govern women's lives.

Marriage as the Condition of Female Legitimacy

Beauvoir argues that marriage is the primary institution through which women are accorded social identity and value under patriarchy (328). In a patriarchal set-up, marriage is not a personal decision on how a woman would want to live her life, instead, it is the way to legitimise a woman's existence. That is to say, through marriage a woman becomes a recognised subject in the social order. Outside this set-up, a woman is automatically deemed bereft of social selfhood. This argument finds an evocative articulation in the social world of *Rita Welinkar*.

Rita is in her forties, financially self-sufficient, professionally accomplished, and socially illegitimate. Her unmarried status is not a neutral biographical fact but a form of deviance; it is her failure to fulfil the primary social obligation of femininity. Every relationship in the novel is inflected by this illegitimacy. Her parents look at her independence as ingratitude and her spinsterhood as obstinacy. Salvi himself, who has been in a relationship with Rita for more than fifteen years tells her parents that she should get married. At the hospital her nervous breakdown is viewed through the frame of her singlehood. The nurse's question, "Aren't you married?" is posed in such a way that the answer to the question would explain everything to Rita (Gokhale, 1995, 35).

A very revealing expression of this dynamic unfolds when Rita purchases a flat for herself using her own savings. Instead of rejoicing on her accomplishment, Rita's family (except her sister, Sangeeta) turn this purchase into a grievance against her (Gokhale, 1995, 71). Her father "threw a tantrum, slapping his forehead again and again with the palm of his hand," while her mother "wept noisily." Their gripe is that the money spent on the flat should have been used for Sangeeta's marriage. "What did she need a flat for?" is their fundamental question. This episode places centre stage Rita's marginalisation within her own family. As somebody who had been supporting her family financially for the past two decades, the same is expected of her forever. For Rita, the flat represents independence from marriage, for her it is a space that does not require a husband. Worse still, Salvi too is incapable of seeing the flat through Rita's eyes. When Rita invites him to the flat, he "stood on the threshold, mouth hanging wide open and eyes rolling around the flat […]" (Gokhale, 1995, 61). He sees the flat as sending a confirmatory

message to his family about their suspicions regarding his relationship with Rita. Oblivious to what's going on in his mind, when Rita says that they can meet here in the flat with a clear conscience, Salvi curtly responds that only his wife has a right to a clear conscience (Gokhale, 1995, 61), implying that unlike Rita, she upholds societal norms. In Beauvoir's theorisation, the flat may well be seen as an act of transcendence: a woman taking charge of her own life rather than meekly waiting to be incorporated into someone else's. The family's rage at it is the rage of people who experience a woman's transcendence as an affront.

When Rita is hospitalised, her two sisters Dolly and Sherry write identical letters counselling her to adapt to societal norms. "That's the only way to sanity," according to them (Gokhale, 1995, 28). It warrants mention here that it was Rita who found grooms for Dolly and Sherry and married them off, spending money that she had earned. It is further fair to say here that Dolly and Sherry's letters to Rita do not portray sibling concern, but they are the voice of women who have chosen immanence and now see it their duty to pull other women into their ambit. Rita's furious response — "Do all married women have an automatic right to counsel me merely because I'm single?" (Gokhale, 1995, 28) is not just personal, it is a cry that refuses to bow down to the call for social conformity.

There's also a particular instance in the novel, when due to the mounting pressures of her life, Rita begins to lose focus in her work. Once considered smart and promising by her colleagues, she was now at the receiving end of jibes from them. Of her, they said: "She's out to catch a man at any cost. Poor thing. No husband, no kids. Wasn't bad looking at one time. Wonder why she didn't marry. Don't you know why?" (Gokhale, 1995, 91)

The Female Body Under Surveillance

Beauvoir argues that women's bodies are not experienced as their own but as objects under perpetual external evaluation. A woman's body is her primary social currency; its value determined not by how she inhabits it but by how it meets the standards of those who assess it. In *Rita Welinkar*, the body is a sustained site of gendered Othering, and Gokhale's narrative portrays the process through which Rita moves from internalised shame to hard-won recognition of herself.

Skin colour is the first and most persistent marker of bodily Othering in the novel. Rita's mother, Nalini, is a fair-skinned Brahmin woman whose complexion was her primary social asset. It was the quality that made her desirable, and more importantly, compensated for her eloping and marrying a casteless man. Rita has not inherited her mother's fairness, and its absence runs through the narrative as a conspicuous deficit. The run-up to Rita's nervous breakdown has been particularly difficult on her, so much so that she puts on a lot of weight. This is also the time when Rita decides to experiment with bright colours in her outfits which causes her mother to comment: "Why must she dress like a *kamati* woman?" (Gokhale, 1995, 19) That is to say, the colours of Rita's outfits are vulgar and are not appropriate for a dark-skinned woman. One can well discern that this comment by Rita's mother does not come from a place of maternal concern for her daughter, but is a transmission of social hierarchy that confers value exclusively on fair skin. This has a specifically Indian dimension that Beauvoir's framework unwittingly accommodates: caste and patriarchy intersect here, with fairness coded as upper-caste, marriageable, and legitimate. Rita's body thus marks her in this system as doubly insufficient. Nivedita Menon's remark mentioned

earlier about society being dismissive of those who do not conform to norms of physical appearance finds a resounding resonance here (3).

The moment that materialises the novel's argument about bodily Othering is Rita's mother's response to Rita's hospitalisation. When Salvi visits her parents, her mother's first questions to him are: "How is she looking now? Is she slimmer?" She then goes on to say, "It would be good if the illness helps her slim down" (Gokhale, 1995, 19). The casual cruelty in this situation is a laying bare of the operative mechanism of a social system in which a woman's physical appearance trumps everything else in her life. This is Othering in play: the reduction of a person to the appearance of their body, evaluated by one-dimensional, unintelligent external standards one cannot meet.

Rita's own relationship to her body is complex and undergoes a change as the novel progresses. With her gaining weight, she is infuriated at people calling her fat (Gokhale, 1995, 2). She takes up severe dieting, but even that doesn't help her. This causes her to wonder: "Could Salvi possibly really love me if this was what I looked like?" (Gokhale, 1995, 91) From tying her self-worth to her appearance and consequently to Salvi's validation of her, Rita comes around to see herself for who she really is. Convalescing in the hospital, when she looks at her face in the mirror, she finds her eyes beautiful. "Large. The colour of the golden surangi flower" (Gokhale, 1995, 6). This honest tête-à-têtewith the self may be taken to understand that Rita is perhaps for the first time seeing herself through her own eyes rather than through the social gaze that has assessed and found her wanting. This moment may be read as a woman, at long last, beginning to reclaim her body as her own.

Female Sexuality Without Legitimate Structure

The relationship between Rita and Salvi is the novel's most pertinent and poignant demonstration of how female sexuality is structured and constrained by patriarchal social arrangements. It is also where Beauvoir's framework operates with the most analytical force.

Salvi is Rita's former boss. He is fifteen years older than her and married with two children. When Rita joins the workforce fresh out of high school at eighteen, he funds her college education, supports her professional development, involves himself attentively with her parents, and becomes—in a scene of quiet intensity on the eve of her sisters' double wedding—her lover. The relationship that follows spans more than fifteen years and is, for Rita, the most sustaining emotional connection of her adult life. Salvi's care for her is genuine. But the relationship has a structural asymmetry that Beauvoir's analysis of women in love illuminates with precision. In their relationship, Salvi retains his public life, his marriage, his social legitimacy, and his family; Rita has none of this. She cannot claim the relationship publicly, build a future around it, or be recognised as his partner in any social context. His desire for her is accommodated within his social arrangements. Her desire for him has no social existence at all. She is desired but not chosen. The relationship sustains her, but can never give her social standing.

The foregoing is, in Beauvoir's terms, a precise enactment of Othering through sexuality. Female sexuality is made socially legitimate within the structures that men devise and control. Outside these structures, a woman's sexual and emotional life is invisible, shameful, or both. Rita has given Salvi love, loyalty, and what the novel makes clear is, genuine intimacy. In return, she has received genuine

affection exercised entirely within the limits of his social comfort. The relationship could not, by its structure, give her what she needed: public selfhood.

An important aspect that warrants discussion here as it complicates the relationship between Rita and Salvi is the question of structural power, which extends beyond the emotional asymmetry already discussed. When Rita enters the workforce at eighteen, Salvi is not only significantly older than her, but holds institutional power over her as her boss. It is therefore evident that their relationship originates within a hierarchical framework that shapes its subsequent development. While the narrative casts light on care, mentorship and emotional intimacy, it cannot be ignored that these elements are embedded in a set up with blatantly unequal distribution of power.

Beauvoir's analysis of how immanence is produced is clarifying here. Immanence is not only enforced through social norms and family pressure from without; it is also built into the structures that shape the self before one has the tools to recognise or resist them. Notably, Rita does not come to Salvi because she freely chose him for a partner. Instead, she comes to him as a young woman whose entire formative adult life was guided and shaped by Salvi. To wit: her education, her professional choices, her confidence to care for her family etc. The fifteen-year age gap between Rita and Salvi is not merely a biographical detail; it is an undeniable marker of mismatch in experience, worldliness and social knowledge that compounds the existing asymmetries of employer and employee, patron and dependent. The very structure of this relationship is such that Salvi's choices, social arrangements and comfort set its terms. Rita's desire, as one can surmise, has no existence independent of Salvi's willingness to accommodate it.

While Beauvoir's framework provides a structural account of female immanence, Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* offers a culturally specific "Reveal Formatting" function for the Indian landscape (vii). Menon argues that the social order in India functions much like "nude makeup": it requires the faithful performance of prescribed rituals to produce an effect of "untouched naturalness" (vii). In the world of *Rita Welinkar*, what is experienced as a personal choice or emotional connection is always already embedded in institutional arrangements that have pre-formatted the conditions under which those feelings become possible and legible (ix).

Crucially, Menon draws attention to how Indian patriarchal arrangements persist through the active cultural valorisation of dependency as care (20). In the Bombay middle-class milieu, Salvi's patronage would be recognised not as a hierarchical organising of the world around gender but as its opposite: the behaviour of a responsible, generous man. The social field does not present this arrangement as an exercise of power to be questioned; it presents it as a form of private protection to be grateful for (vii, 222). This represents the complex formatting that goes on below the surface of what looks like a smooth, consensual relationship, ensuring that the power-laden values of the patriarchal society remain invisible to those they constrain (vii, 212).

Salvi's behaviour after Rita's breakdown makes evident what Beauvoir anticipates that Glick and Fiske (1996) would later name as benevolent sexism. Salvi refuses to visit Rita in the hospital claiming that his visit would not be good for her mental health. He further suggests to her parents that Rita should get married. He even tells her she would have a pick of men to choose from. All the while that Rita is hospitalised, Salvi visits her parents every day. Each of these acts is the behaviour of a man managing a woman's existence in order to

make his life comfortable, but all the while doing it under the garb of keeping the woman's welfare in the forefront. In the usual sense of the word, Salvi cannot be considered a villain; it is sad though that he is undeniably more insidious than a villain. Salvi's behaviour is the benevolent exercise of control over a woman who has been constructed as Other, sustained in that position by a man who benefits from keeping her there.

Women's Complicity in Gendered Othering

Beauvoir's most uncomfortable argument is that patriarchal structures are not sustained by men alone. Women who have been Othered and have internalised this Othering are its most efficient enforcers. Because they know what the stakes here are, they police deviance from prescribed femininity in other women with a thoroughness that men could not achieve. *Rita Welinkar* portrays this Othering by women in such a way that these women, like Salvi, cannot be reduced to villains. Behaving so has become their way of life so much so that they see no fault in it.

Rita's mother, Nalini Welinkar, is the novel's most sustained example of this complicity. Born into a Brahmin family, Nalini elopes with a casteless man. She is promptly ostracised by her family due to which much of her married life is spent in social precarity. She survives by internalising the very hierarchies that damaged her, i.e. by accepting the terms of her own Othering and making them her own. Her caustic comments on Rita's skin colour, her body weight and her outfits are a reflection of the social code against which she has measured herself all her life. She enforces these constraints on Rita because she simply cannot see any other standards by which to live life. Her tragedy, in Beauvoir's framework, is not that she is cruel, but that she is trapped: a woman who has accepted immanence so thoroughly that she experiences her

daughter's reaching for transcendence as incomprehensible and threatening.

Dolly and Sherry, Rita's two married sisters, represent a different variant of this complicity. Their identical letters counselling compromise cause Rita to liken them to "the chorus of a bloody Greek tragedy" (Gokhale, 1995, 28). They speak from within marriages that Rita relentlessly worked hard to make possible. Their advice, again, is not malicious, but comes from the only place they know. They are defending the choices they have made by insisting that those choices are the only ones that keep a woman sane in this world. They are women who chose immanence and their lives have meaning only as long as they see no meaning in any other options by which to live.

The hospital's role in the participation of the gendered Othering of Rita warrants mention here. "You must not brood, Miss Welinkar", says Dr. Chandran, the psychoanalyst to her (Gokhale, 1995, 41). Rita finds the doctor's voice syrupy and totally phoney. The hospital's role in Rita's treatment is to return her to a state of functional social existence. It does not concern itself with the underlying cause of what might have led to Rita's nervous breakdown. The hospital treats her suffering as a condition to be corrected rather than an experience to be understood. This too is a form of Othering: the refusal to recognise a woman's inner life as worth taking seriously on its own terms.

The Letter as Gendered Resistance

Beauvoir argues that one of the primary mechanisms through which woman is maintained as Other is by denying her the legitimacy of her speech (25). Her experiences, her desires, her longings, her analysis of what afflicts her are not considered worthy of articulation. She must either learn

to speak in ways the social order can accommodate—the language of gratitude and self-effacement—or she must not be heard at all. This denial of speech has been the defining condition of Rita's adult life. When Dr. Chandran rebukes her for brooding, Rita thinks to herself: "So what am I supposed to do? Give me someone to talk to then. I've nobody to talk to" (Gokhale, 1995, 41). Rita has people around her, but they aren't the ones who would listen to her because they are all invested in not hearing what Rita has to say.

It is while recuperating in the hospital that Rita decides to write a letter to her only childhood friend, Saraswati. She decides this as she surmises that she must come face to face with what her life has been if she is to rebuild it in any meaningful way. She primarily wants to write of her relationship with Salvi, thereby giving voice to her experiences that she could not share with those around her. What started as a clandestine relationship, could no longer remain covert for Rita. She needed Salvi to openly acknowledge what they shared, but that was not to be. Hence her letter to Saraswati is a significant act of resistance in the novel. It can also be read as an act of transcendence in Beauvoir's sense. "I need your shoulder," she writes to Saraswati, but what she really needs from Saraswati is not support or comfort, but for her to be a witness to Rita's life (Gokhale, 1995, 45). Rita needs somebody to receive the gravity and heft of her life story without reducing it to a cautionary tale or a call for compromise. That said, she also doesn't want anyone to laud her choices, she just needs to see that her life story is worthy of attention.

Rita's choice of Saraswati as the recipient of her letter is appropriate. This is because Saraswati knew Rita before she got ensconced into the maws of patriarchy. Rita and Saraswati studied in the same class; it was the time when Rita danced freely. Seeing her dance, Saraswati could sense even

then that Rita moved her body with a freedom and authority that was entirely her own. Writing to Saraswati, is therefore, writing back to her own self; to the younger Rita who hadn't yet become sullied by the social machinery of immanence. That this letter is addressed to a woman, and not a man, is also of significance. Writing to Saraswati denotes that Rita isn't seeking validation from a patriarchal order, instead she is only seeking recognition from another woman.

The effect of the letter on Saraswati, an aspiring writer, is worth paying attention to. Reading the letter in her Chembur house—husband travelling for work and so free from the obligation of cooking a hot lunch for him—Saraswati finds herself examining her own marriage, body, choices, desires and resentments. The letter does not merely describe Rita's Othering to Saraswati, its effect on her is something akin to the removal of a veil from in front of her eyes such that she sees for herself the limiting social structures around her that she has refused to see until then. Rita's letter thus performs what Beauvoir's entire project in *The Second Sex* demonstrates to be necessary: making the structures of Othering legible rather than allowing them to pass as natural.

The Breakdown as Threshold

A nervous breakdown is usually seen as a culmination, the point at which the self can no longer function. Gokhale gives a refreshing spin to this; Rita's breakdown, in her own words is a beginning. "What a gift this nervous breakdown is. A miraculous escape from bullockness" (Gokhale, 1995, 13). The bullocks of Rita's metaphor are yoked to the water wheel and go round and round all day because they have no minds to do anything else. These are the people who have accepted immanence without question. Rita has had a mind, and the breakdown is what happens when a mind finally refuses, after long years, to keep going round and round.

Each section of this chapter has traced a different dimension of Rita's gendered marginalisation: the social illegitimacy of her unmarried status, the perpetual surveillance of her body, the structural denial of legitimacy to her sexuality, and the complicity of other women in maintaining these structures. The breakdown is the point at which these accumulated dimensions exceed what the self can contain.

The hospital, paradoxically, becomes the space for Rita's first real freedom. For the first time in her adult life, she has unstructured time; time not organised around anyone else's demands. Rita uses this time to think and to write, which unsurprisingly, gives her a sense of the shape of her life. She understands that her recurrent dream of giant balls of hair rolling silently toward her is her psyche's image of the accumulated immanence she has been living. The dream recurs in the hospital, signalling that the work of confronting what has been done to her has only begun. But the letter to Saraswati is evidence that Rita is doing that work, and is tentatively, beginning to become a subject rather than remain an Other.

Crucially, the novel offers no easy resolution. Rita ends the unacknowledged relationship with Salvi without any rancour or hostility. Impressively, she acknowledges what Salvi has done for her right from providing for her education, guiding her in her career and for loving her in the way only he could. Very significantly, she tells him, "You made me question the ideal and the reality of love between a man and a woman. I came to a new understanding of people and their relationships" (Gokhale, 1995, 172). The doors to her flat—which she will now share with Saraswati and Sangeeta—are still open to Salvi, but not in any romantic sense. As readers, we therefore, don't know what exact direction Rita's life will

take. Instead of conventional narrative closures, Gokhale here leaves us with a Rita enlivened by self-understanding. Rita is still examining her life, and therefore in Beauvoir's terms, it is a transcendence begun.

Conclusion

The mirror Rita receives in the hospital, in the beginning of the novel, is a cheap one, full of hidden air bubbles that distort the details of her face. "But there's truth to be found in between the bubbles," she says, and finds it: in her eyes, large and surangi-gold, quite beautiful in fact (Gokhale, 1995, 6). Gokhale sets up this scene on the tenth day of Rita's hospitalisation. By then she has had some time to take stock of her life. Rita's request for the mirror is intentional as she thinks to herself: "[…] a mirror should be part of the therapy for a nervous breakdown. You have to look at yourself closely to get to know yourself again, don't you? You have to live with yourself for the rest of your life, after all. You've got to be able to say to yourself, this is me. This is me. This and none other is me" (Gokhale, 1995, 3). This internal monologue of Rita may be taken as the moment when she sees herself for the first time in her life. This is important for Rita as after being continually judged by others for the past twenty years she has finally found something in her worth acknowledging. In Beauvoir's terms, she is beginning to become the subject she has been denied being.

Rita Welinkar portrays the Bombay middle-class world of the 1980s and 1990s. It constructs Rita's Othering by deploying specific instruments, namely: caste-inflected standards of beauty, the marriage market, and the illegitimacy of female sexuality outside patriarchal structures. Her Othering is not a single event but a slow accretion, each instance small enough to be overlooked, but taken in totality, it is the decimation of the female selfhood.

What makes Gokhale's novel an important contribution to the literature of marginalised identities is its insistence on Rita's intelligence and self-awareness throughout this process. She is not a victim who does not understand her situation. She understands it with painful clarity; she recognises herself as one of "the eldest daughters of non-earning fathers," and she reads the dynamics of her relationship with Salvi with forensic honesty. Her understanding makes her marginalisation all the more devastating because she is unable to step outside it. What this chapter ultimately contends is that knowing one is being made Other does not set one free; one has to look oneself squarely in the eye, as it were, and find something worth acknowledging as one's own. Rita faced herself, recognised herself and so began the process of rebuilding her life. She is no longer the inessential; she is essential to herself.

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Transgender Identity, Marginalisation and State Responses: A Comparative Study of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and West Bengal

Dr. Ambika Roy Bardhan

Abstract

The transgender community in India has long experienced marginalisation due to rigid gender binaries, social stigma, and limited institutional recognition. Despite recent legal advancements, transgender persons continue to face discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, family life, and access to public spaces. This paper examines the relationship between transgender identity, socio-economic exclusion, and state responses through a comparative study of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. Using a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design, the study relies on secondary data drawn from academic literature, government reports, census data, policy documents, and credible media sources. Thematic analysis is employed to identify key areas of marginalisation, while a comparative framework evaluates state-level initiatives such as transgender welfare and development boards, identity documentation, healthcare provisions, educational inclusion, and livelihood support. The findings reveal notable inter-state variations: Tamil Nadu emerges as a pioneer in institutional welfare mechanisms, Maharashtra reflects progressive policy intent with conceptual limitations, and West Bengal adopts a development-oriented approach. While these initiatives signal important progress following the 2014 NALSA judgement, persistent challenges remain in effective implementation,

social acceptance, and participatory governance. The paper concludes that legal recognition must be complemented by inclusive social attitudes and sustained, rights-based policy interventions to ensure dignity, equality, and empowerment for transgender persons in India.

Keywords: *Transgender identity; Marginalisation; Gender binaries; State policy interventions; Transgender welfare and development boards*

Introduction

In India, the transgender community has been marginalised for centuries and still fighting for their right to identity. Transgender politics is one of the escalating issues in our contemporary Indian society which challenged the age long concept of gender dichotomy as well as the legitimacy of the State.

Gender studies involve the concept of gender binaries that is male and female, where the former dominates over the latter in a patriarchal society. In this respect it is important to understand the basic difference between 'sex' and 'gender'. The former refers to the biological characteristics whereas the latter refers to the social and cultural characteristics. Sex is what we all are born with but gender is constructed by the society. Thus, our body gets gendered as either male or female according to our assigned sex at birth. All characteristics associated with masculinity are considered as superior and those associated with feminity as inferior. This is how sexual politics developed its roots by controlling over sexuality. Both male and female are used as primary category in all societies but with time there have been changes in the perception of the people with regard to their gender identity.

In this respect, the concept of 'transgender' emerged, which is relatively new, dating from the late 1980s and it was not until the mid-1990s that it was used in its current popular sense. It is an umbrella term that describes many people who transcend "normative" embodiments of masculine and feminine, including transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens and kings, gender queers, and other gender variant people. (Weiss 2009, 27-28) The term is applicable to a range of individuals who express their gender in non-traditional ways. In general, transgendered people find their sense of self as female, male, or other to be in conflict with their assigned gender role (which was based on genital anatomy at birth).The term transgender can be accurately applied to self-identified bigender, gender radicals, butch lesbians, cross-dressing married men, transvestites, intersex individuals, transsexuals, drag kings and queens, gender-blenders, queers, gender queers, two spirits, or he-she's. These individuals may form their own social networks, hence the term "transgender community." The term transgender is used to refer to people who claim the term on the basis of feelings that their assigned gender role is incongruent with their sense of self. Many people deviate from traditional gender norms. In the broadest sense, perhaps we all do, but most do not self-identify as transgendered. Sexual orientation refers to one's emotional and sexual attractions, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of self as being female, male, or otherwise gendered. (Burdge 2007, 243-244)

Transgendered individuals are targeted for mistreatment when others attempt to enforce conventional gender boundaries.

This work discusses about the gender-based oppression that has resulted into identity crisis for the transgender community. The existence of the transgender

community within the mainstream society was always denied because of their lack of identity clarity. However, it is only recently that the transgenders have come out of their closet and airing their problems. They are claiming for their rights and recognition before the Government as being the citizen of the State and challenging the alien law of section 377 under the Indian Penal Code.

Our society recognises 'male' and 'female' as the primary gender category and accepts the heterosexual relation between them. Any deviation from this binary framework of gender is taken to be 'unnatural' or 'not normal' and society ostracizes those individual or group of them. In this context, the transgenders were never recognised as a part of the society. Even when 'transgender' or 'third gender' has been legally recognised, non-acceptance from society still prevails. The 'gaze' of the people requires change in order to make the orthodox society 'inclusive' by accepting the transgenders as a valuable part of it. If the third sex people are nurtured and inculcated with adequate skills, they can even contribute towards the development of the society. But reality shows stigmatization and discrimination towards the transgenders who are still fighting for their existence and identity.

Statement of the Problem

Transgender community in India were treated with much respect in the past but with the coming of the British rule, it introduced anti-sodomy law as a measure of Puritanism. This law criminalises the act of homosexuality and as a result 'transgender' as an identity got threatened. Since then, transgenders remained in a closet, hide their identity for the fear of punishment and treated no less than an untouchable.

1. Identity: This is the biggest challenge that they face in every step of their life. They constantly fight for their identity as a 'trans-gender' and also for their existence as a 'human being' and not as an 'alien'. Identity crisis is the major hurdle that they face because of lack of recognition from the society which recognises the binary division of gender of 'male and female.' Trans people are stigmatised because their gender identity is questioned at every possibility of their life. They are still fighting for their gender recognition as 'transgender' which has been legally recognised as the 'third gender' by the NALSA declaration in 2014.

2. Employment: Non-acceptance from society resulted in lack of employment opportunity for the transgender community in India. Thus, they are left with the only option of begging and the ceremonious performance they do for a new born as a form of blessing, for their survival. They even earn money through sex work. Though such practices are condemned in society, they receive the money but people never fail to abuse them.

3. Education: Transgender people are hardly educated. The family of the transgender people hardly send them to school out of the fear of social harassment and their child will be taken away by the Hijra community. Though this is not the case with all the families, this is the case found mostly in relation with the intersexed child. Even in the cases with those- MTF and FTM transgender people, to pursue education they either had to hide their real gender identity or had to give up studies. There is no provision for 'third gender' or as "other" in educational institutions except recently this category has been added in Jadavpur University and Presidency University. But no school has this provision and neither the colleges.

4. Public Facilities: This is the area where they face immense problem and harassment. Public toilets either categorised as 'gents' or 'ladies' but no provision for the transgender people. So, when they use either of the toilets they face with resistance from that section of the gender group. Transgender community continuously have to fight for their basic rights and use of other public facilities like- travelling in public transport they have to deal with public taunts, teases and gaze that signals rejection towards them. Similar condition they face while visiting restaurants, in hospitals and other places.

5. Family Life: Under section 377 of Indian Penal Code marriage between same sex people or any deviation from heterosexual relationship is not legally recognised and considered as not normal. Thus, transgender people in such situation take resort to social marriages with their partners and live secretively with them or they are compelled to opt for SRS for leading a 'normal' family life.

6. Politics and Decision making: Hardly any transgender individual is represented in any political party and their interests are given prominence. Neither at the grassroot level nor at the national level that they are adequately represented. There are number of transgender activists, journalists and scholars that recently made their existence felt in the conservative Indian society.

7. Medical Benefits: Transgenders are sexually exploited, harassed and susceptible to diseases like HIV/AIDS. No special wards are there in hospitals whether private or public. Here the transgender individual face discrimination in which ward they are to be admitted whether male ward or female. Other than this, they have to bear the full cost for SRS if they wish to opt for. All transgender does not receive

help free medical check-up. It is only through few NGO's or community-based groups that help the Trans people, that too small fraction of them that they could reach.

Objectives

- To review the concepts of Gender and Transgender community.
- To present the statement of problems that has resulted into marginalised conditions of the transgenders in India.
- To critically evaluate the measures undertaken by the State Governments for the transgender in the states of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employs a **qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design** to examine the socio-economic marginalisation of the transgender community in India and to assess the effectiveness of state-level policy interventions. A qualitative analysis has been done on conceptual, social, and policy-based issues that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. The study also adopts a **comparative case-study approach,** selecting Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and West Bengal as purposively chosen sites due to higher percentage of transgender population in the chosen states and their relatively advanced institutional mechanisms—such as transgender welfare or development boards—along with their documented policy initiatives.

Data Sources

The research relies exclusively on **secondary sources of data**, collected from a wide and diverse body of literature. These include academic books, peer-reviewed

journal articles on gender and transgender studies, reports published by NGOs and international organisations such as UNDP, government policy documents and notifications, and reliable digital news sources. Statistical information, particularly demographic and literacy data, is drawn from the **Census of India (2011)**, which provides the first national enumeration of transgender persons. Additional insights are derived from media reports, official state announcements, and scholarly commentaries that document the lived realities, legal challenges, and developmental concerns of transgender individuals across India.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were analysed using **thematic and interpretive qualitative methods**. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to identity recognition, socio-economic exclusion, access to public facilities, educational constraints, political underrepresentation, and healthcare challenges. A **comparative analytical framework** was then used to systematically evaluate the policy interventions undertaken by Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. This involved assessing the scope, implementation, and outcomes of welfare measures such as identity documentation, educational reservations, healthcare access, and livelihood support. The comparative approach enabled the study to foreground differences in state responses and to critically examine their implications for transgender empowerment.

Transgender in India: Condition and Prospects

In India, total population of transgender is around 4.88 lakh as per 2011 Census. Indian Census has never recognised the third gender i.e. Transgender while collecting census data for years. But in 2011, data of transgenders were collected

with details related to their employment, Literacy and Caste. The data of Transgender has been confined inside "Males" in the primary data released by the Census Department. For educational purpose, separate data of Transgender has been curved out from that (Nagararajan, 2014).

Top Five Transgender Populated States in India:

STATE	TRANSGENDERS	CHILD (0-6)	SC	ST	LITERACY
INDIA	487,803	54,854	78,811	33,293	56.07%
UTTAR PRADESH	137,465	18,734	26,404	639	55.80%
ANDRA PRADESH	43,769	4,082	6,226	3,225	53.33%
MAHARASHTRA	40,891	4,101	4,691	3,529	67.57%
BIHAR	40,827	5,971	6,295	506	44.35%
WEST BENGAL	30,349	2,376	6,474	1,474	58.83%

Source: Census of India, 2011

Transgenders recognised by the Government of India in the census 2011 is a giant leap forward for the community which till now remained faceless and ignored in the society by large. The Government will now have an exact count of the community which will help them to shield the shunned community against all kinds of injustices towards them. In the above table it is clear that Uttar Pradesh has the highest population of transgender people but Maharashtra leads in terms of literacy rate and this is definitely a step towards empowering the third sex group in the State of Maharashtra. Education is very important for all the three categories of individual- male, female and transgender for developing their status of living. Provision for primary education is necessary for the third gender people as most of them lack the ability to write their own names or don't know how to do a signature.

This paper will focus on some of the States that have tried to contribute for the upliftment of this community in India, they are- Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and West Bengal, taking help from various textual sources like- articles, journals, newspapers and web sources.

Tamil Nadu

Transgenders in India often have to contend with mixed responses whenever they are in public spaces. This has led many of them to live mostly in segregated slums. According to a report in the Times of India, 30 May 2014, an official count puts the number of the transgenders in India at 4.49 lakh, about 4.5% or 22,000 of them live in Tamil Nadu (Nagarajan, 2014). Eking out a livelihood from begging and commercial sex work, they continue to remain marginalised, ghettoised and disempowered as a community.

In Tamil Nadu a movement started by a group of transgender activists has contributed much to transgenders being able to procure documents and thus insist on certain civil rights. These documents include ration cards, voters' identity cards and passports. Tamil Nadu is the first state to accord a gender status (third gender) to this community (Gopalakrishnan, 2015).

This is the first state to introduce a transgender welfare policy that provide access for free SRS in the Government hospital which applies only to the trans-feminine people, free housing program, various citizenship documents, admission in government colleges with full scholarship for higher studies, forming self-help groups, and initiating income-generation programmes. Tamil Nadu was the first state to form Transgender Welfare Board in 2008 with representatives from the transgender community and social welfare minister as the president of the Board. The measures taken like issuing

separate ration cards for them, the rights of trans-men and gender variants are discussed in the Welfare Board, effort to improve their education by issuing order in 2008 to create a third gender category for admissions to government colleges. The government also decided to conduct census for the community in order to issue identity cards for them. They are also provided with vocational training and self-employment grants for small business entrepreneurs. Every year, the state government allocates Rs 10 million for the board's programmes and activities. As a first step, the board conducted an enumeration of the transgender population in all the districts. Moreover, free Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) is being performed in selected government hospitals in collaboration with the board. On March 2008, a telephone helpline called 'Manasu' was set up by Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative-Voluntary Health Services for the member of the transgender community. Sahodari Foundation in 2007 is a well-known organization set up in India for creative and alternative advocacy method. Srishti Madurai launched India's first helpline for Genderqueer in 2011. An important initiation took place on 2015, when Tiruchi Siva of DMK moved the Bill which was supported by the political parties in Rajya Sabha so that they get the benefit of belonging to the reserved communities like SC/ST, enrolment in schools and jobs in government (Chakrapani 2012).

There are some of the distinguished transgender people in Tamil Nadu, they are- A. Revathi, who got driving license as women in 1997and wrote books like "Feelings of the Entire Body" and "The truth about me: A Hijra Life Story". Later "Naan Saravanan Alla" in 2007 and "I am Vidya" in 2008 became the first Trans woman autobiography. Some popular faces in media- STAR Vijay of a talk show hosted by a trans-woman named Rose, others like Karpaga performed

a lead role in the Tamil Movie 'Paal', A. Revathi also played a lead role in 'Thenavattu'. Some transgender people in politics like Kalki Subramaniam, a transgender rights activist, writer and an actor tried in vain to contest election in 2011 and again in 2014. She is first among the very few who took part at the national level elections from the transgender community. In 2016, C Devi is the first transgender person in Tamil Nadu to contest in the Assembly elections. There were protest raised by the transgender activist Swapna and a gender activist Gopi Shankar demanding reservation and to permit alternate genders to appear for examinations like- Banks, UPSC, SSC and TNPSC. Swapna is the first Trans person to clear TNPSC Group IV exams and Prithika Yashini from Tamil Nadu became the first transgender in India to be appointed as a sub-inspector of police (Chakrapani, 2012).

Thus, Tamil Nadu has made great strides in trying to integrate transgender people into the society. These examples should be the inspiration for the transgender community as a whole. It shows that talent or capability is something that every individual possesses so opportunity should be made open to everyone on merit basis. Yet the Board goes through some inadequacies in its selection process by nomination which has created misunderstanding among the transgender community leaders who are not part of the board. Questions have been raised in public forum regarding the lack of regional representation of transgender members in the board. There lie disagreements over who should be the beneficiaries of the TGWB and who should be regarded as Aravanis. The major challenge the transgender community faced that they were hardly involved in the decision-making process. They received pre-decided agenda and very little time was allotted for raising issues in the board meeting. TGWB did not have adequate funds for schemes like short-stay home and small

grants for education. Board provided identity cards only to MTF who were considered as Aravanis but the card did not mention about gender identity as transgender. Moreover, such ID card was not accepted as valid card for their identity and address. Whereas there are some who with the help of the card was able to open bank account and get passports. Thus, the TGWB needs to communicate well relevant government departments regarding the validity of the ID card issued by them (Chakrapani, 2012).

Maharashtra

Maharashtra government was the second state to announce the formation of the Welfare Board on 2014 to run welfare schemes and explore jobs for the community. The transgenders will have to register themselves with the board in order to get the benefits from it. The decision of the state government comes after a consultation with UNDP in 2013 has partnered with the Department of Women and Child Development, brought thousands of transgenders to interface directly with the Chief Minister and other government representatives to discuss the specific welfare needs and provided inputs on policy towards setting up the transgender welfare boards. The draft made by Prithviraj Chavan for the "third women's policy" includes that no person should be forced to live the life of a transsexual. Some of the initiatives taken up by the government- First state to set up a cultural institute dedicated to the transgender community. The Welfare Board will provide avenues for formal education, expand employment and self-employed opportunities, run health programmes and provide free legal help to them. The State has also added the category of third gender for admission to the academic year 2017-18 and first time for the state where the transgender students can apply for engineering and pharmacy courses in the next academic year (Menon 2014).

The major loophole in the policy is that they ignoring the fact that a person could choose to be a transsexual. They consider it to be a disease which needs to be cured. However, it is extremely necessary that unless their identity is respected and they are accepted in society without any conditions, the battle is only half won. The financial help for the community provided by the State government within its policy would only count when acceptance from society is there.

West Bengal

West Bengal comprises of more than 30,000 transgender people for which the Transgender Development Board have been constituted in 2015. ("West Bengal Government announces the constitution of Transgender Development Board for over 30,000 plus-strong communities in the state.") The Mamata Banerjee government passed the decision to constitute a board that will address the problems of the transgender people in the state. The community that has been marginalised for centuries now the rise of Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal has come as a lucky break. Mamata Banerjee tweeted in favour of The Transgender Persons Bill, 2014 passed in Rajya Sabha for setting up of commissions at state and central level. Pioneered the concept from Transgender Welfare Board in Tamil Nadu, Chief Minister of Bengal said "Bengal has already set up a Transgender Development Board" (The Hindu, 2015).

The Minister-in-Charge for Women and Child Development, Shashi Panja addressed a press conference at Nabanna and announced the State Cabinet has passed the Constitution of Transgender Development Board on the initiative of the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee who is personally concerned with the community. Panja said "Quite often we have seen that they (transgenders) have been

deprived of education, employment opportunities, begging on the streets and going through gross neglect. To attend their problems, we have constituted the board. This will be the first board in the country which is formed for development and not for welfare, which are formed for charity." The Board have 13 members, headed by a chairperson. The Board represents various transgender communities in the state and coordinate with the State's Coordination Committee, headed by Shashi Panja. This Board works as a wing of the women and child development and social welfare department and was formed in July 2015 which took a year-and-a-half to allot office space and staff by the state. The Supreme Court has ordered each state to set up their independent board for the cause of transgender people, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra set up their 'welfare boards' while Bengal formed the first 'development board' for the community. It was announced by Shashi Panja that once the board starts functioning people belonging to transgender community will be given identification cards and will be entitled to government schemes like Indira Awas Yojna, government grants, ration cards, health services and other facilities. Ranjita Sinha, who is a transgender, leads the Association of Transgender/ Hijra in Bengal (ATHB) told PTI that "We want identity and recognition as the third sex. Setting up a board for us is extremely important. We want entitlements to all our basic human rights," the activist said (The Indian Express, 2015).

On 13 January, 2017 the office was handed over to the prominent members of the board. Shashi Panja as the Chairperson of the Board, Manabi Bandopadhyay, first transgender principal as the vice-chairman, the board will have two members from Panja's department including a joint secretary and members from the transgender community and NGOs working with them. Social activist Leena Gangopadhyay,

who is the chairperson of Women Development Undertaking, has also been included in the Board. In the first meeting of the Board at Nabanna it was decided that the Government hospitals in Kolkata will soon have Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) units and such initiatives will minimize financial and various other difficulties that a transgender individual face while under-going sex-change surgeries at private hospitals. The Board also decided that a mass awareness drive would be carried out so that members of the community could live with dignity. The Board even decided to launch a 24*7 helpline for transgenders and other sexual minority communities. They can lodge their complaints without any fear or delay through this helpline. The State Government is also planning to have *'toilets'* for the transgenders since they always face the harassment while using ladies' toilets. Shashi Panja said "I would take up the matter of setting up toilets for transgenders on a priority basis." (The Indian Express, 2015).

There have been many positive comments, support and recommendations with the constitution of the Board, some like- Union social and empowerment minister Thawaar Chand Gehlot was happy with the formation of the board and said "In the next session of the Parliament, we'll try to pass the Bill. If that happens, we might introduce scholarships for them"; author, actor and transgender rights activist Kalki Subramaniam says that the board should not be inclusive to transgender women but to transgender men and intersex people; Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, chairperson of the Maharashtra Tritya Panti Protection of Rights and Welfare Board, has welcomed the move in Bengal and suggested that "West Bengal's Board should not remain as just an apex body. It must be empowered enough to execute the policies." Priya Babu, a former member of the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board, says, "A national-level Transgender Welfare

Board with regional representation is required." Tamil Nadu Transgender Rights Association's president Jiva says "Being a former member, I recommend that the West Bengal Board give monthly pension of Rs 1000 to every transgender above 40 years. We have implemented this here. Issuing ID cards will also help (Dasgupta, 2016).

Thus, it can be said that West Bengal has experienced achievements to some extent with regard to transgender rights, recognition and empowerment in the society-

1. **Manabi Bandopadhyay** completed her MA in Bengali and then became the first transgendered person from West Bengal to complete a PhD and the first transgender professor in Vivekananda Centenary College in Jhargram and first transgender principal in Krishnagar Women's College. She had a sex change operation in 2003 which finally allowed her to embrace her feminity. She published India's first transgender magazine "*Ob-Manab"* (sub-human) (Hindustan Times, 2015).

2. **Shree Muhuri** became the first transgender person from Kolkata and Bengal who got legally wedded after she received all her necessary documents regarding her sex-change surgery (India Today, 2017).

3. West Bengal government also tried to change the scene for the transgender people and sex-workers children with the state-owned Hidco, along with an NGO who appointed 15 transgender persons and sex workers' kids to *work as guides* at Eco Park in Rajarhat (The Times of India, 2015).

4. Bengal government for the first time provided the opportunity for the state's transgender people to be enlisted as voters in the forthcoming assembly elections since being recognised as the 'third gender' by the Supreme Court. Earlier

they could cast their votes as males or females. But in 2016 they can vote as transgenders. ***Aparna Banerjee*** a transgender and member of the state's transgender development board said "My three daughters, too, will vote as a transgender. It would, indeed, be a moment to cherish for us." Though, there are more than 30,000 transgender people and only 500 of them have been included in the voters' lists. According to Ranjita Sinha Bengal government has been proactive with regard to having more transgender people enrolled in the voters list (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

5. In West Bengal hospital like- R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata has taken the initiative for the transgender community by creating ***separate space cabins and special teams*** comprising counsellors, psychiatrists, nurses and other health personnel, at the premise. The hospital also plans to have a facility for SRS (IANS, 2015).

6. Furthermore, Varsities like ***Presidency University and Jadavpur University introduced separate criteria in admission forms*** for inclusion of the third gender (IANS, 2015).

Conclusion

The above discussions could be concluded by saying that the transgender community in India, are the sexual minority group, have always been marginalised and neglected since centuries. Despite initiatives taken by the policy makers both at the Centre and State government level and at the level of the mainstream society, most of the people seem to be reluctant to recognise this community because they are obsessed with the idea of gender dichotomy and are unmindful of the existence of the "third gender." In the absence of public support, the third gender community faces a host of socio-economic problems. They are often subject to sexual exploitation and sexual harassment because of

their vulnerable position in the society. Consequently, they are highly susceptible to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. However, it is only in recent times that transgenders have started airing their problems publicly with the support of civil society organisations. Their primary need is for recognition from their families as well as the communities in which they live and the government's confirmation of their identity as female or "third gender" category. Besides, they also expect the government to set up suitable income generating schemes.

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"Since When Does an Individual Choose His Nation?" : Diaspora, Precarity of Bond Slavery and Stateless Voices in Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower*

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Abstract

The dominant narratives of history have often failed to acknowledge countless instances of human suffering, pain, and adversity across different times and spaces. One such forgotten corner of history consists of the Korean diaspora in Mexico which started with the perilous journey of 1,033 Koreans who migrated to Mexico in 1905 as indentured labourers. This paper draws on Kim Young-ha's historical fiction titled *Black Flower* (2003/2013), to analyse the long-neglected history of the marginalized Korean labourers who were deceived into being bond slaves and were subjected to exploitation, hunger, wounds and illness in Mexican haciendas under autocratic landowners. Kim uses the mode of fiction to challenge the absence of archival documentation on this part of the Korean diaspora. This research argues that the migrant labourers turned into victims of extreme precarious conditions, both physically and psychologically, as a result of losing access to both national belonging and individual autonomy. Through the critical lens of diaspora and vulnerability studies, this paper attempts to make visible those lives that have been treated as losable and 'ungrievable' by the mainstream historiography. Finally, by a close reading of *Black Flower,* the paper also analyses the unflinching

resilience of the stateless Korean immigrants and their attempts to establish a New Korea, free from the precarities of class, culture and race.

Keywords: *Slavery, Precarity, Korea, Diaspora, Statelessness, Hacienda.*

Introduction

"Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others."

Regarding the Pain of Others by Susan Sontag.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, diaspora studies have undergone a significant evolution, acknowledging diaspora as a dynamic and metaphorical space rather than adhering to its fixed, traditional connotations. Academicians, social workers, and policymakers have often defined diaspora as the dispersion of certain ethnic communities from their historical homeland. Contemporary postcolonial and diaspora studies increasingly focus on the lived experiences of diasporic communities whose identities are invariably shaped by moral degradation, statelessness, and precarity as a result of their dispersion. Diasporic statelessness becomes one of the root causes of marginalisation and other forms of human rights violation because the lack of legal rights puts the diasporic and marginalized communities in a precarious position within the nation-state (Kingston, 2017). The escalating refugee crisis of today's globalized world is reshaping and reevaluating the meaning of diaspora and displaced communities which now include, as William Safran (1991) argues, "several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court* – in much the same way

that "ghetto" has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments. . ." (83). However, official history has orchestrated the strategic obfuscation of innumerable communities who exist at the margins of a nation they perceive as 'home' and subsequently fall victim to identity distortion, precarity, and displacement.

Precarity, writes Judith Butler (2009), is a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death." (25). In their book, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Butler (2004) problematizes the notion of 'ungrievable' lives—lives which cannot be grieved and mourned because those are already considered unreal and lost. Vulnerable lives, which are "neither alive nor dead", are not considered fit enough for being valued by the dominant power structures. The unequal distribution of resources by the state in the face of calamity (natural or man-made) is the root cause behind labelling certain populations more vulnerable than others. Butler (2009) also introduces the concept of precariousness, which they associate with the ontological and existential fragility of human beings (a notion which propagates that humans are inherently vulnerable just by the virtue of their bodily 'being'). However, they also argue that the bodily injurability of a person is integrated into social and political organizations—which have been developed historically to maximize precariousness for some and minimize for others. In the context of diaspora, precarity arises when the fundamental political and socioeconomic rights of certain communities remain largely unacknowledged and are rendered losable by either their nation of origin or their host nation—or by both. The lifeworlds of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, engaged in any form of forced, unpaid, meagerly paid

or indentured labour in the globally prevailing neoliberal labour market, are characterized by insecurity and instability that aggravate their precarious conditions (Lewis et al., 2015). This study will aim to trace the forgotten history of the Korean contract labourers in Mexico and situate it within the larger framework of a global South Korean diaspora by analysing Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower* through a Butlerian lens of precarity.

A Brief History of the Korean Diaspora in Mexico

Amidst the turbulence of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, the Korean peninsula suffered the outcome of the military advances made by these two global forces. However, after the Japanese navy overpowered the Russian armada in May, 1905, Japan further infringed on Korean territories (Meyer, 2023). The political exploitations and socioeconomic demands imposed by the Japanese colonization on Korea prepared the ground for an unlikely migration. The mass migration of Korean workers to the sugar plantations of Hawaii had already begun to create a spur since 1902, but after 1905, Japanese imperial power restricted the entrance of Korean workers into Hawaii as a diplomatic move to reserve this place exclusively for Japanese labourers. Rocio Lucero (2025) in her article, "Aenikkaeng: The forgotten story of Mexico's Korean migrants", mentions that during the last years of President Porfirio Diaz's dictatorship, the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico "faced a labour shortage as global demand surged for henequen, an agave plant used to make rope and twine" (para. 3). To overcome this sudden shortage of labour and to divert Korean emigration away from Hawaii, a Japanese firm (the Continental Colonization Company) coordinated with a British labour recruiter named John G. Meyers to export Korean labourers to Yucatán.

Young and able-bodied Koreans were strategically lured by alluring advertisements in newspapers like the *Capital Gazette* which convinced them about the prosperous, picture-perfect dreamland of Mexico—a land, so the Koreans were made to believe, would like nothing better than to magically save them from their broken and empty homeland.

In April, 1905, 1,033 Koreans coming from diverse walks of life boarded the British ship, *Ilford* from the port of Jemulpo and embarked on a transpacific journey to Mexico's Yucatán peninsula (Quintanilla, 2021). The immigrants dreamed of a new land which was filled with promises of employment, financial stability, education and a better livelihood, as Victoria Quintanilla (2021) comments, "Immigrants could labour, save money, and return home with the rewards of their hard work after just a few years." (para. 1). However, what started as a bright and innocuous promise soon turned into rubble as the Koreans realized that they have been deceived into being sold as bond slaves to Mexican haciendas. Thus ensued the decades-long suffering of the Korean contractual labourers in a land that shared no diplomatic relationship with Korea and in a feudal economy that desired utmost profit with little to no ethical responsibilities. Hahkyung Kim (2012), in an extensive study titled, "Korean Immigrants' Place in the Discourse of *Mestizaje*", mentions, "On the other hand, the illegal aspect of the immigration process itself suggests Mexico's disregard for legal and political responsibilities, a consistent attitude that correlates with the Mexican treatment of Korean henequeneros" (245).

One of the noticeable factors of this first wave of Korean diaspora in Mexico is the scarcity of any primary archival documentation that might record the numerical data of the immigrant population. The small sources that arbitrarily record the history of the first-generation Korean

immigrants in Mexico, are restricted to Korean newspaper articles, diplomatic correspondence between hacienda-owners, Japanese diplomats and Korean officials (Kim, 2012). Moreover, the scarcity is even more evident in the absence of relevant documents recording the lived realities and precarious existence of the 1,033 Koreans who were stuck amidst the subhuman living conditions in several Yucatán haciendas. Hea-Jin Park (2006) mentions that fleeting news about the subjugation and plight of the labourers travelled back to Korea when a Chinese whistleblower named Hé Hui reported on the situation in henequen haciendas in a San Francisco-based Chinese newspaper. When the report was republished later in the *Hwangson Shinmun* on 29th July 1905, it caused nation-wide grief and confusion in Korea. Following the circulation of this news of forced slavery, Korean emperor Gojong took special initiatives to inquire about the treatment the labourers were receiving under the Mexican government. He also sponsored the travel of the vice minister of the Foreign Office, Yun Chi-ho to Mexico to have a first-hand investigation done.

However, after the Japanese imperial power forced the Korean emperor into signing the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty in November, 1905, Korea's diplomatic sovereignty was handed over to the Japanese Empire—a political occurrence that reduced emperor Gojong to be a puppet under the imperial power. This treaty also left the exiled immigrant labourers at the mercy of their fate because the issue of their welfare became the least of the concerns the Korean Empire was experiencing. The subsequent Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1907 and the formal annexation of Korean Empire to the Empire of Japan in 1910 turned Korea into a mere colony under Japanese rule (Kim, 2012). This political turmoil annihilated the migrant labourers' dream of returning to their

homeland after the end of their contract, leaving them with no land and rendering them stateless. Academic research on the Korean diaspora to Mexico often relies heavily on oral accounts and secondary resources unlike scholarship on Korean diasporas to Japan or America, where archival records are more readily available and widely studied. Moreover, this history of the Korean diaspora in Mexico "became of academic interest in Korea starting the late 1990s mainly for their participation in the Korean independence movement" (Kim, 2012, 261-262). Originally published in Korean in 2003 and later translated into English by Charles La Shure in 2012, Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower* is a historical fiction novel that purposefully fills this gap in historical documentation by weaving a fictional tale of suffering of the 1,033 Korean migrants. Kim's novel, though rooted in history, goes beyond the factual historiography and blurs the line between history and fiction.

Diaspora and Precarity of Bond Slavery in *Black Flower*

In the author's note of the English-language translation of *Black Flower,* the celebrated South Korean author, Kim Young-ha (2003/2012) writes: "I made up my mind to write this novel and began to research the story in earnest. It was not easy. Sources were scarce, and those that I could find were vague. To add to this difficulty, as soon as the emigrants left Jemulpo, Korea was reduced to a colony of Japan" (304). This scarcity of information prompted the author to write a fictional story that imagines an alternative account of the Korean diasporic history in Mexico that surpasses the spatially and temporally determined nationalist discourses (Lim, 2021). *Black Flower*, in its rich and journalistic style of narration, conjures up a fictional story that humanizes the forgotten and overlooked diaspora of the Korean migrant labourers in Mexico. The story, told through a bunch of

different perspectives, brings forth the horrifying tale of precarity and statelessness that haunted the Korean contract labourers who boarded the ship, *Ilford* from the port of Jemulpo in 1905. Due to the absence of any archival record of the names and whereabouts of the first-generation Korean migrants, Kim introduces various fictional characters in the novel and reimagines what might have happened to those 1,033 nameless people. The tragic journey and star-crossed love between Kim Ijeong and Yi Yeonsu acquire central space in the story which is followed by the misfortune and tragedy of all the other characters. The story begins in the future with a dying Ijeong and then moves back in the past to describe numerous events that led up to it.

Precarity begins to seep through the cracks of the Korean migrants' lives from the moment they boarded the ship to go to Mexico. Kim (2003/2012) portrays, through the young eyes of Ijeong, how the Koreans were deceived into believing in a dream that was futile from the start—"Someone had said that there was gold in Mexico. They said that yellow gold poured forth from the earth, making many suddenly rich" (9). Moreover, the ship's departure continued to be delayed as chickenpox broke out among the passengers and their passports were not issued by the British minister. In a way, the ship became a temporary refugee camp for the passengers, a liminal space for endless waiting. Melanie B. E. Griffiths (2014), in an essay titled, "Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigrant Detainees", observes that the refugee asylum seekers are often troubled by a non-linear temporal tension where time seems to move at a slower pace than the external world. During their elongated state of waiting for the ship's departure, the Koreans started feeling stagnant in time and space. In the author's own words—"As the *Ilford's* departure

continued to be delayed, it began to feel as if the ship had been a permanent part of the scenery at Jemulpo" (Kim, 2003/2012, 23). Even before the ship departed for Mexico, the Korean passengers received a premonition of their impending vulnerability through the rumours that they were all being sold as slaves in some faraway plantations.

As the Korean immigrants embarked on a prolonged transpacific journey, the sea transformed into a witness and participant instead of being a backdrop in their clandestine migration. The sea generated a sense of being trapped in a liminal place where the migrants felt stuck between life and death, hope and fear, misery and faith. Moreover, the bodily vulnerability of the passengers was aggravated even further by the dire living conditions inside the ship— "The *Ilford* was completely lacking in material comforts, and not only were the passengers stored like baggage but they exceeded the optimum capacity of the ship by at least three times, making their suffering that much worse." (Kim, 2003/2012, 32). The immigrants were tangled together and their bodies tossed against each other each time rough waves crashed against the ship. The voyage thus brings forth the "vulnerability of flesh, bone and breath" (Kaur, 2022, para. 3) through an ensemble of sick, tired, diseased, and dying bodies which were troubled by diarrhoea, fever, overflowing toilets, vomit, excrement and vile stench. The Koreans crowded in the ship were displaced from their homeland but were yet to arrive at their desired destination which rendered them trapped and alienated in the liminal space of the sea and increased their corporeal precariousness.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2009) comments on alternative ways to "bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness that will allow us. . .to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for

their value as lives." (77). *Black Flower* incorporates a human dimension to the precarities of the Korean labourers-turned-bond slaves who were at the receiving end of a national failure, as Kim (2003/2012) observes: "None of them would have boarded that ship had they had their own land" (72). Bak Jeonghun, a soldier, expresses his disillusionment with his homeland that led him to migrate to a new land— "That pitiful country, what has it done for us that we should go back? Did it not starve us when we were young, beat us when we grew up, and abandon us when life was finally bearable?" (Kim, 2003/2012, 74). In their diasporic existence, the Koreans repeatedly compared themselves with non-human beings like dogs, mice, poultry coop or pigs, signifying the literal lessening of their human attributes. Upon arriving in the Yucatán peninsula, the Korean migrants finally realized the misleading terms of the contract. Kim observes how the owners of the henequen haciendas paid a dear price for the labourers to overcome a severe labour shortage and intentionally chose Korean immigrants as they could not speak Spanish, hence were unable to flee.

The feudal hacendados (owners of the haciendas) turned the Korean labourers into bond-slaves, confiscated their personal belongings and forced them to work ceaselessly alongside the Mayan labourers in exchange of an extremely low wage that was barely enough to satiate their hunger, let alone helping them to return to their homeland after the contract ends. The Koreans were stuck in a no-place, entirely cut-off from the outside world, a situation which enhanced their marginal existence in Mexico. Kim (2003/2012) argues that all the promises of working freely, being able to earn a lot of money and returning home wealthy were mere candy coating. Martha Fineman (2008), in her essay titled "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human

Condition", argues that the embodied vulnerability of an individual or a collective can be mitigated or aggravated based on their different positionality within a structure of economy and institutions. Similarly, in *Black Flower,* the Korean labourers' exposure to vulnerability was not only an embodied or universal phenomenon but their fragility was directly magnified by the Japanese colonization of Korea and the hacienda economy of Mexico that violated and exploited their fundamental human rights. Kim (2003/2012) reflects on the fate of the bond slaves in *Black Flower*: "When the men got drunk they whimpered, wondering whether this was the cost of their nation's sin, the sins of society, their own sins, or simply fate." (127). Their lives, however, were not any better in Korea than their lives in Mexico as droughts, floods and famines were a daily affair in their homeland which left them in an equally precarious position.

Kim extensively narrates how the bond slaves lost authority over their own bodies during the period of their contract in the haciendas. They were made to work with henequen which, unlike rice, was a wild plant with sharp spikes. Henequen, popularly known as the 'green gold' of Mexico for its economic value, was a plant which the Koreans were completely unfamiliar with. As a result, the labourers were repeatedly wounded while cutting the sharp leaves of the plant—"Their bodies were covered with wounds and sweating profusely. . . . Sweat poured down and soaked their filthy clothes and seeped into their wounds, doubling their pain." (Kim, 2003/2012, 94). The way someone responds to pain is culturally stipulated, for example, one population can vocalize cries and another suppresses them. (Scarry, 1985). In *Black Flower,* the Korean labourers' response to physical abuse is differently shaped than the Mayan labourers in the henequen fields. For instance, Koreans, who were not

familiar with the culture of whipping, were shocked with pain and shame when the hacedados whipped them on the field— "If the Mexicans had spit in their faces, they might have brandished their machetes on the spot. But none of them knew how to cope with this; whips used on horses and cows were being used on people." (Kim, 2003/2012, 95).

Sociopolitical institutions make distinctions between lives that are worthy of protection and lives that are destructible, ungrievable and lose-able because they are already framed as being lost or forfeited. (Butler, 2009). In *Black Flower,* while the feudal land owners stayed at their enormous houses with endless luxuries, the slaves received claustrophobic huts which were barely suitable for a family of four and ate food that was not sufficient to keep them healthy. As a result, they suffered from hunger, illness, skin disease and occasional cases of suicides. They did not receive medicine or proper treatment for their illnesses and survived by working like ants. The diasporic labourers in *Black Flower* were vulnerable against the unyielding topography of the new land in Mexico. Kim observes how the Koreans, who came from a land of abundant rivers and mountains, met with the vast empty lands of the haciendas. For the Korean migrants, Mexico was a land of sparse water and blazing sun that could burn their flesh as they continued to work tirelessly like beasts of burden.

Moreover, the women were differentially exposed to fragility in the diaspora. Women of marriageable age such as Yeonsu were repeatedly met with the predatory eyes of the men around them. Yeonsu, after conceiving a child with Ijeong out of wedlock, had to sacrifice herself to save her honour by becoming a concubine of the interpreter, Gwon Yongjun. Moreover, the women in the haciendas had to work as much as their male partners while also cooking and cleaning for

their families. As Kim (2003/2012) comments, "Even on days above 90 degrees, the women could not take off their skirts or short jackets; their shirtless husbands drank and beat them" (119). If a marriage happened between a Korean man and a Mayan woman before the end of the contract, it meant that the woman and their children would automatically become a property of the hacendado and could not leave the hacienda even if her husband's contract expires. In another instance, Kim shows that the Korean slaves in a certain hacienda were being forcefully converted into Christianity as the hacendado perceived their idol worship to be a satanic ritual. This incident portrays the deplorable conditions of the bond slaves who were forced into renouncing their religious identities.

In *Black Flower,* Kim challenges the Confucian hierarchies of class, gender and race and argues that such distinctions are meaningless in a diasporic space that is characterized by extreme hostility. The Mexican haciendas became a place where Koreans from various classes of society gathered together and were crammed in pitifully small spaces. Orphans, peasants, retired soldiers, priests, thieves and ruined aristocrats—all were treated as migrant labourers by the landowners and none of them received advantages based on their hierarchical status. As orphaned Ijeong and Yeonsu (the daughter of a royal aristocrat) developed a romantic relationship with each other on the sea, they planned to create a new future for themselves in a new land which supposedly had abundant opportunities for education, freedom and economic prosperity—a promise that could never be fulfilled had they been inside the rigid structures of Korean society. As Kim (2003/2012) himself comments— "The Korean status system, which was now only implicit even in Korea, had disappeared without a trace aboard the *Ilford*." (28). In another instance, this dissolution of class distinction becomes

evident through Ijeong's remark: "Do you really think the distinction between high and low, old and young, and man and woman will be as severe as it is in Korea? Look at this ship we are on. Aristocrat or commoner, all must line up to eat." (Kim, 2003/2012, 68). Such was the fate of the people who were abandoned by their homeland and were illegally sold into slavery.

Marginalization, Resistance and Alternative Nation in *Black Flower*

In *Black Flower,* Kim introduces a plethora of characters and attributes equal spaces to each one of them signifying a collective nature of diasporic suffering. By blurring the boundaries between history and fiction he recognizes the desire of the stateless Korean migrants to be fully recorded in history. Rachel Haejin Lim (2021), in her essay titled "Ephemeral Nations: Between History and Diaspora in Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower*", comments, "From the margin of the margins, Koreans in Mexico test the convergences of national sovereignty, ethnonation, and diaspora" (197). The story is not only a tale about survival but also about sustainable communities, resistance and home. The author attempts to situate this history of the Korean diaspora in Mexico within the discourse of a global South Korean diaspora by fundamentally critiquing the idea of a Korean ethnic nation (*Minjok*). The characters in the novel, disillusioned by both their home and host nations, attempts to establish a New Korea that complicates the dichotomies of history and fiction, reality and invention. (Lim, 2021, 198). The novel portrays the continued statelessness of the marginalized migrants even after the end of their bond slavery. The Japan-Korea Annexation treaty left the overseas immigrants with no land of their own and the Mexican Revolution used them as mercenaries without recognizing them as citizens of the nation.

Statelessness is not merely a violation of the 'right to nationality', but it is also a violation of human autonomy and a threat to human welfare. (Kingston, 2017). In this regard, Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of 'bare life' gains relevance—an idea which argues that a life becomes fractured and 'bare' when it is stripped of its national belonging and remains undocumented. The Korean migrants in *Black Flower* were not only temporally displaced from the flow of national history but also removed from the circulation of political and diplomatic information. In Kim's (2003/2012) own words—"The immigrants in Mexico had known little of affairs in their homeland, and so were shocked to hear that they no longer had a nation to which they could return" (223). After their homeland disappeared in history, the Korean immigrants felt the need for an organization that would unite the Koreans scattered across Mexico. This desire was fuelled primarily as a need to gain back their national dignity by taking part in the Korean independence movement against Japan. However, Kim does not offer a glorified notion of a unified Korean diaspora, rather he brings forth the unequal power dynamics among Korean diasporas in different countries.

In the third part of *Black Flower* Kim uses the mode of fiction to narrate an alternative, imagined scenario where Jo Jangyun, Ijeong and many other former bond labourers join the Mayan revolutionaries in Guatemala and attempt to create their own nation, New Korea amidst the dense jungles and ruined architectures of Tikal. Kim portrays this as an act of active political resistance against historical erasure. The creation of New Korea, though largely fictional, is portrayed to be a last desperate act of the Korean migrants to reclaim their voices and reject the exclusionary modes of nation-states. After they were denied entry in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, Jo Jangyun, the former soldier, was the first person

who proposed to create a newly organized nation with the few dozens of men who still remained in Mexico. However, his nationalist ideals were based on false fantasies and he ended up reiterating the very colonialist ideals he was opposing. On the other hand, Ijeong's nationalist ideals were more liberal and were grounded in the equality of class, religion, race, and gender. Ijeong's desire of founding a New Korea stemmed from his belief that nations-states were the roots of all evil and none of the nations he passed through "was the ultimate form of government he desired." (Kim, 2003/2012, 240). The creation of a new nation was a constant act of rejecting all ideas of nation and nationality. The ultimate failure of New Korea again chronicles a non-sensationalized picture of diasporic existence, as Lim (2021) comments: "Through the distinct temporality of "New Korea", created in the knowledge of its fated destruction, Ijeong argues that the only option for those rendered culturally and politically illegible is to dispense with the universalizing concept of "nation" itself" (215). In a way, the portrayal of resistance in *Black Flower* is manifested through a fervour to create new social and political orders while denouncing the old ones.

Conclusion

In the author's note of *Black Flower,* Kim (2003/2012) mentions that during the process of writing the novel, he thought himself to be a shaman who has been assigned to write the stories of the people who had been completely forgotten by history. As a shaman, he carries the past into the present. As for the name of the novel, Kim comments that black is a colour that combines all the other colours. Similarly, the novel is a combination of many elements, like religion, status, race and gender. However, black flower is something that does not exist in reality; it is only a creation of the imagination. In the same manner, the utopian dreams of the characters

in this novel were conjured up by their imagination which never materialized in reality. Kim recognizes the struggle of the 1,033 Korean migrants to entre the archival records and in that process, he also gives voices to their precarious journey from migration to slavery and ultimately to statelessness. *Black Flower* questions mainstream historiography's claim to empirical reality and challenges the institutionalized narrative that strategically discards the lives of peripheral people who continue to exist in an in-between space, never fully receiving historical consciousness. Despite the vast, epic-like structure of the novel, which at times diffuses the main plot, *Black Flower* remains the first work of fiction that chronicles the lived realities of people in an unknown diaspora. Even in his portrayal of an alternate history, Kim remains truthful to the idea of Koreanness through an authentic portrayal of Korean culture and spirituality that shined through the darkness of their precarious diaspora.

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Matua Community in West Bengal: Socio-Economic Dimensions and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper discussed the socio-economic conditions of Matua community in West Bengal. It has found that the community of Matuas in West Bengal, mainly consisting of the Scheduled Caste who migrated from Bangladesh, is struggling with socio-economic circumstances characterized by severe poverty, rural isolation, and dependence on farming and daily labour wages. They are in larger numbers in North 24 Parganas and Nadia regions. They still have lack in education and suffer from inequality of income, where most families are earning low income. Although they have seen some success in literacy rates, gender discrimination and quest for citizenship remain prominent factors in their socio-economic life. These challenges are foundational in nature due to their origin being the displacement experienced by them historically, majorly focusing on Citizenship Anxiety Act, socio-economic discrimination, and educational inequalities. Several policies have been launched by the Government of West Bengal to empower the Matua community by helping them socially and economically and educating them and acknowledging their cultural identity.

Keywords: *Citizenship Amendment Act, Harichand Thakur, Matua Community, Scheduled Caste, Welfare, & West Bengal.*

Introduction

The Matua community is a 19th century socio-religious reform movement that began in Orakandi, East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) by Sri Harichand Thakur for the purpose of improving the condition of the marginalised "untouchables" who were part of that society. The Matua community was focused on education, social equality and self-respect and upraise the lower caste Hindus from their caste-based oppression and conversions. The movement began around the 1860's and provided a means for many of the peasant/lower caste communities, especially in the Orakandi area, to regain their dignity. The Matua community believed strongly in the principle of "Swayam Matua" or "self-empowerment". As the Matua community began to gain momentum through their social and reform efforts led by Sri Harichand Thakur and then by his son, Guruchand Thakur, the Matua community was able to change from passively suffering oppression to actively asserting themselves by focusing on literacy, and becoming self-sufficient economically. During the partition of India in 1947, many Matus migrated from East Bengal to India due to the resultant trauma and upheaval caused by the partition; yet a significant number of Matua families remained in Bangladesh. Today the Matua community in Bangladesh (particularly in Barishal) is a unique socio-economic group with many challenges facing them, such as landlessness, minority status, etc., yet they continue to practice their unique spiritual beliefs and traditions. Overall, the Matua Movement has evolved from a purely religious group to one that is very active politically in advocating for the rights of many marginalised groups as well as advocating for the rights of other minority groups.

The Matua community, which is a group of Dalit Hindus from what was once known as West Bengal, began arriving in large groups beginning with the partition of British India in 1947. It is due to the civil strife that plagued Bangladesh after its independence from Pakistan in 1971, mainly because of religious persecution, social discrimination and other factors. They are guided by the teachings of Harichand Thakur, with a head office in Thakurnagar, West Bengal. Their migration to India was mainly motivated by a desire to escape religious and societal oppression in the Bangladesh of the 1940s-1970s (and later) and to achieve political stability and socio-economic status. One of their primary purposes when settling in India was to gain community safety and equality among themselves in their new country (Ahmed, 2024). The general objective of the paper is to explore socio-economic dimensions and challenges of Matua community in West Bengal.

Education and Social Mobility of Matua community

In contemporary society, the principles of educational reforms espoused by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur have facilitated upward social mobility for Matuas by transitioning them from being labourers to teachers, businessmen, and civil servants (Chowdhury 114). The primary emphasis on "education" served as an empowerment tool for the community to take action against upper-caste domination and allowed them to achieve higher levels of literacy, income, and social status. The importance of formal education as highlighted by Guruchand Thakur helped the community to break free from the institutionalised barriers that had historically confined them to traditional occupations based on caste. The encouragement of both skill development and entrepreneurship by the movement contributed to the community gaining access to occupations. The encouragement

of equality through the promotion of an end to caste distinctions within the community provided the opportunity to participate in communities and public life. As a result of these changes, the community has developed a strong sense of unity and a strong identity, making it a politically active group in West Bengal today. The continued legacy of these organisational reforms will continue to serve as the foundation for social equity, education and development within the Matua communities.

There are certain paradoxes in the "refugeehood" process undergone by the Matuas after the Partition. While they had initially been forced to leave their homes, this has resulted in severe economic marginalisation and disruption in their education. Their belief in education for self-help has resulted in the 2nd and 3rd generation Matuas becoming more educated than the other groups under the Scheduled Caste category (Sen 38). The Mahasangha enables youth in border districts of West Bengal to attend school through the establishment of schools and increasing literacy rates of lower caste groups. They provide vocational training to increase their socio-economic well-being. Mahasangha promotes the empowerment of marginalised groups by access to educational opportunities and the documentation they need to qualify for the assistance they need.

Livelihood and Life style of Matua community

Most of the Matua communities of West Bengal live in the bordering districts, among which the highest populations are found in 24 Parganas, Nadia and Jalpaiguri. The main clusters of Matua people are located largely in North 24 Parganas. The central location providing them with social/political power where the headquarters of the Matua Mahasangha are located. This area is primary settlement area

for post-partition immigrants with a dense concentration of Matuas. Significant concentrations of Matua-related politics can be found along with other areas in Jalpaiguri where migrants from East Pakistan had settled. Individuals belonging to the Matua community predominantly reside in bordering districts.

Due to historical marginalisation as a community of partition refugees, the Matua community experiences significant economic limitations. A large part of the Matua community's economic vulnerability relates to the inadequate formalization of land rights in refugee colonies. Many members of the Matua community suffer from the 'vicious cycle' of poverty, lack of security in their livelihoods, and limited access to formal credit or developmental resources because they cannot formalise their property. Many Matua families are moving to urban areas for searching employment (Ahmed 246-247). For those who have been able to experience any upward mobility from this shift, it has only benefited a small number of Matua community members. Majority of the Matua community members have moved into low-paid, insecure, and informal urban jobs. Welfare programs have been made available to Matua community members in West Bengal and have reached most of the Matua community members.

Matua forms the largest socio-religious community in West Bengal. The Matua community is a 19th, century phenomenon and is a social movement against caste oppression initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. Equality, education, and devotion are the main beliefs of the Matua community. Therefore, their ways of living are predicated on these three core values of human behaviour. In addition to that, they stick to the guidelines of simplicity, humility, and honesty. Their goal is to eliminate through their actions oppression and alienation in their society. From an

economic standpoint, they are quite vulnerable as a society. Most of the Matua people live around the poverty line and have very limited means to support themselves and their families. Manual labour constitutes the primary sources of income among the majority of the Matua communities, which include farming and fishing occupations, besides small-scale business enterprises. The other Matua groups found in Thakurnagar (North 24 Parganas) are engaged either in garland making or are involved in unorganised occupations at lower pay scales. In general, the rural masses are poor, indeed, finding some means of livelihood poses a huge problem. The womenfolk of the Matua community are usually seen working alongside their male counterparts on the farm, while they also secure employment as maidservants outside.

The Matua community's religious philosophies are intertwined with their lifestyle, promoting simple communal living, equality among its members. They attain "Swayam-Dikshiti" (self-realisation) through continuously chanting Harichand Thakur (Hari). They reject the need for priests and instead have the faith in self-realisation through achieving their purity. They live according to a set of twelve commandments known as Dwadash Agya, which emphasise truthfulness about one another and how to treat others with love and respect, particularly women. The gamchha (the towel) and the aichar mala (a garland of beads) are also symbols of their faith. The Matua Baruni Mela is one of their largest gatherings, where Matua members from all around come to Thakurnagar in March to pray, sing and eat together. Matua families mostly reside in rural areas and border districts in many simple, mostly unrefined houses, typically constructed of mud. The Matua community adheres to their religious beliefs and uses their culture to encourage simple community-based living (Biswas 6-10).

Table 1: Livelihood and Lifestyle of the Matua Community

Aspect	Description
Main Festival	BaruniMela (Matua MahaMela) is a festival commemorating the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur and takes place in March or April at Thakurnagar.
Social Structure	There are three main categories of people: 1) Religious people such as Sadhus and Gosains, 2) Educated elites and intellectuals known as Bhadrolok, and 3) Economically/socially disadvantaged workers.
Daily Life Philosophy	The guiding principle is Hate kammukhenam "performing the duties of the world (work) while chanting the holy name of Hari".
Cultural Symbols	The central part of their identity and worship is the use of Gamchha (cotton towels) and Aichar Mala (string of prayer beads).
Key Livelihood Activity	Making flower garlands is one of the local, home, based economic activities in regions like Thakurnagar.
Residential Pattern	They have a high concentration in the border districts and in refugee colonies.
Women's Roles	According to the philosophy, all are equal, but in reality, many women are either confined to housework or working as domestic helpers/ agricultural labourers in order to supplement family income.
Economic Status	A large portion of the community is economically backward, often living in refugee colonies or unofficial settlements.
Occupational Diversity	While mostly agrarian/labour-oriented, many have diversified into small business, teaching, and other white-collar jobs.
Primary Livelihood	Traditionally, they worked as fishermen, farmers, and manual labourers. In West Bengal, many in the lower-income bracket work as factory workers, day labourers, or are involved in small cottage industries.

Source: Roy, Sanchita. "Namasudra and the Matua Religion" *International Journal of Reviews and Research in Social Sciences* 7.3 (2019): 619- 622. DOI: 10.5958/2454-2687.2019.00038.8

The community of Matua people largely consists of refugees who were forced out of still rural Bangladesh after the partition and during the liberation struggle from Pakistan in 1971. These refugees often struggle to obtain necessary documentation for citizenship making the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) a key political issue within their community. Based on the teachings of Guruchand Thakur, education is seen by this community as a means of breaking free from social slavery. The Matua community is also a large organised voting block and acts as a voting block through the Matua Mahasangha. It is the major organisation responsible for coordinating actions regarding the Matua community's social and political activities. The Matua community continues to fight for both higher statuses within society and greater legal rights and recognition in West Bengal; and has a unique draw in its connection to spirituality while also being very active politically (Halder 468-470).

Citizenship & Legal Status of Matua community

Community of Matua, largely composed of Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, who's legal and citizenship issues have not yet been sorted out. Although many of these individuals may have resided in India for many years, there is an apparent danger that they may be left out during the Special Intensive Revision of the voter list. The Union Home Ministry has set up committees to expedite the process of applying for Indian citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 to ease the concerns of the Matua community. The Matua community is largely a Scheduled Caste group made up of millions who moved to West Bengal from Bangladesh prior to and coming out of the 1971 War. Although many people from the Matua community possess various official documents, such as Aadhar cards or Voter I.D. cards, their citizenship is in limbo and are relying on the CAA

for evidence of legal status as citizens of India. The purpose of the CAA is to formally, legally grant citizenship status to those who entered India for reasons of religious persecution before December 31, 2014.

The desire to own a CAA/NRC is associated with the aspirations of the Matua community to attain legal and secure citizenship status for themselves as Indians, thus giving millions of such people from Bangladesh a chance to lead a stable socio-economic life, devoid of the "refugee" tag. This is a double-edged sword approach because it recognises the right of such refugees to stay on Indian soil without any fear of deportation or loss of identity. Identity politics and the All India Matua Mahasangha have altered the Matua community from being marginalised and neglected to becoming a significant political force that even a brief glance at West Bengal's electoral map will reveal is a major swing vote. The community is now attracting the attention of political parties due to their demand for citizenship, infrastructure, and social recognition, which the leaders of the Mahasangha are compelling them to be a united front.

One of the biggest challenges for this group is that they do not have adequate documentation to demonstrate their origin from Bangladesh. The Matua community represents a sizable and powerful voting bloc in West Bengal and has been caught or "on-the-fence" between being promised citizenship and having fear of being excluded from the rolling out of new citizenship laws and rules. To provide people who do not have all the documentation required for CAA applications with some form of proof of their origin, "eligibility certificates" are being issued through camps established for issuing these certificates. However, there are also widespread fears that many Matua's will be excluded from the final revised roll of electors, adding to their anxiety. The situation is still very

much on a "fluid" basis and is heavily impacted by both state and federal politics; and the Matua Community is looking for assurance of citizenship by means of having documentation, and formal, recognised proof of their citizenship.

Gender, Health, and Social Well-being of Matua community

Patriarchal norms are profoundly ingrained in the community. It has combined with extreme economic deprivation to hinder the social and political empowerment of Matua women. The Matua movement, initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, propagates equality and inspires women to get educated, but these women have been subjected to a "triple burden" being marginalised as Dalits, as women, and as economically weak refugees. Inequalities in availability of decent medical care and sanitation between the Matua refugee colonies in West Bengal and the adjoining localities are primarily due to the "unrecognised" status of the former, which results in poorer infrastructure and systemic exclusion. Most Matua refugee colonies are plagued by conditions of overcrowding, shortage of formal sanitation, and very limited access to healthcare.

The Matua religious movement, started by Harichand Thakur around the middle of 19th century, has played a significant role in the change of Namasudra community in Bengal from a marginalised, untouchable group to a self-respecting, politically aware, and well-organised community. The movement, by offering an alternative, egalitarian religious identity that does not acknowledge caste hierarchy and Brahmanical rituals, has raised the community's self-esteem and decreased their social discrimination. Border districts are vital in West Bengal politics because a large number of Matuas, who are a significant refugee community among the Dalits live there. These are really important areas

where recently the voter list purges happened which have created a scared feeling among the people for their exclusion from voting. The leading frontline driver forces behind poverty and marginalisation of the Matua refugees have been their economic non-inclusion and continued exclusion from the main stream society. These Scheduled caste refugees have faced economic, social, and political instability over the past few decades. Most of the refugees belong to the Matua community, which is caught in the cycle of poverty and marginalization and becomes a hindrance in transforming the society of Matuas. The link between the Matua community in West Bengal and Bangladesh made it possible the sharing of practices of political renewal and rituals. Matua community constitutes the one of the largest Dalit groups of Namasudra in West Bengal and Bangladesh. Their spiritual identity as simple followers of Bhakti is turned into a political identity. They adopt political participation as an approach which is in line with the concept of 'worldly duties' (householder life) of the two founders, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. The deletion of voter names in Matua, majority border constituencies of West Bengal were an action that led to serious, long term socio-economic consequences. These people are at the risk of going through 'rootless' descending as one who cannot exhibit the right to one's origins depends on whether or not one carries relevant document. Therefore, lacking in documental proof, poor people especially displaced refugees are vulnerable to be losing their roots (Halder, 110-115).

Challenges of Matua community and Government initiatives

There are many challenges that face the Matua people, living in West Bengal and across India, as they pursue the realisation of citizenship, economic inequalities, reconciling gap in ideology, and overcoming discrimination

within society. Additionally, there are concerns about their citizenship as many of them are still awaiting its full implementation according to the CAA, leading to considerable political instability.

Many families have very little money and rely on small farms or working on a daily basis for a living. However, even with improvements in education, they still have problems with poverty, hunger, and how to grow as a society. There is growing tension within the community about politics and how to interpret Matua. Caste discrimination can be either very subtle or direct, but evidence continues to pile up showing that, even with such large populations, members of community do not have representation at the highest government levels, and this can also apply to women involved in the community. These women have many challenges when trying to enter the workplace or participate in the political process, and many remain at home and take care of the family.

Table 2: Key Challenges Faced by the Matua Community in West Bengal

Challenge Area	Specific Issues
Gender-Based Constraints	Matua women face a dual burden of social restrictions and limited educational/professional opportunities.
Internal/ Leadership	There are internal conflicts within the Matua leadership (for example, a dispute over who will have control of the Thakurnagar temple).
Social	They remain socially backward and marginalized even though their population size is big.
Economic	Most of them live in poverty and are day labourers or work in small industries.
Political	They are exploited as a "vote bank, " and there is voter insecurity due to the deletion of the electoral rolls in the border districts.
Citizenship & Legal	Many of the migrants from Bangladesh do not have official citizenship documents resulting in fear of exclusion and dependence on CAA.

Source: Bala, Arghya and Roy, Sumita. Between faith and fear: The Matua and the electoral roll Current Issue (Feb. 11, 2026). https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/social-justice/matua-voters-citizenship-anxiety-sir/article70616110.ece

There has been an increase in education; however, there are still people who rely on informal low-wage jobs; thus, developing stronger economic empowerment is necessary. There is a need for additional emphasis on improvements to the medical infrastructure. The political strength of the community within West Bengal will ensure that their social and economic demands will continue to create and affect state policy. The government of West Bengal has undertaken a number of development initiatives aimed at improving the status of the Matua community. These initiatives include the establishment of the Matua Development Board, Namasudra Development Board, and citizenship rights. The Matua Development Board was created to promote the overall development of the Matua community through infrastructure development and social and economic upliftment. The Namasudra Development

Board is responsible for development of the Namasudra community, of which the Matua community is a major part. Other initiatives include the establishment of Harichand-Guruchand University; declare state holidays in honour of Harichand Thakur's birthday, and implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

In Thakurnagar, North 24-Parganas, Harichand-Guruchand University was founded with the intention of fostering the educational advancement of the surrounding community. On the birthday of Harichand Thakur, a state holiday has been declared in his honour. The government has attempted to regularise refugee settlement and grant land rights to members of this cultural group (Matua). The state has offered financial assistance for the ongoing development of the Matua Mahasangha and other types of religious or social facilities that the Matua community utilizes. These initiatives raise awareness about and seek to remedy the specific needs of the Matua community, such as obtaining citizenship, accessing an education, or developing physical infrastructure in order to support their cultural and political identity throughout West Bengal (Lahiri, 7782-7784).

Table 3: Key West Bengal Government Policies for Development of Matua Community

Category	Policy / Initiative	Key Details (As of 2026)
Administrative	Matua Development Board	Created as an incubator for socio, economic development and focused welfare delivery
Economy	KisanMandi/Markets	Establishing new ITIs, Polytechnics, and a KisanMandi in Gaighata.
	Land Rights (Pattas)	Distribution of land ownership certificates to the refugees living in the colonies, which helped a lot of Matua families.
Culture	BangaBibhushan	Conferred the state's highest honor on Matua matriarch Binapani Devi.
	State Holiday	A state holiday has been declared on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur.
Infrastructure	Transportation & Civic Amenities	Infrastructure like bridge construction, roads drinking water(Jalatripti project), and sanitation
	Pilgrimage Infrastructure	Besides infrastructure development in Thakurnagar and its adjoining areas.
Education	P.R. Thakur Govt College	Located at Gaighata, the main aim is to provide better education opportunities.
	Harichand-Guruchand University	Located at Thakurnagar (North 24 Parganas) with an extension campus in Krishnanagar.

Source: Sinharay, Praskanva. "Harichand-Guruchand Thakur: the emerging icons of Dalit politics in West Bengal" Religion 52 (2022): 396-401. https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2094784

Conclusion

The Matua people have emerged as a potent socio-religious and political community in West Bengal. Matuaism is their religion, which is an offshoot of Hinduism, centered around self-respect and community organization. The majority of this community continues to be in poor economic circumstances. Majority of community members either are involved in agricultural activities or work as fishermen, or are employed in the industrial sector, particularly as factory workers and unskilled workers. Some families are still living in crude mud huts in refugee colonies or unauthorized areas without basic facilities such as potable water or healthcare services.

The Matua community is reported to have shown significant progress in literacy rates and many members have used the education to reach high levels of achievement. While many people in this community have shown improvement, many of the community are still struggle with their economic status which typically includes agricultural work, factory jobs or very low wage jobs in informal economy. The Matua Development Board, which was established in the year 2018, is an initiative taken by the government of West Bengal State to support the efforts of the Matua community. Matua Development Board has been concentrating on issues related to Education, Infrastructure, and Finance Empowerment. The main strategies that the State is planning to undertake in order to meet Targeted Welfare Schemes, Education for Income Generation, and Infrastructure Development at Thakur Nagar, thereby improving the living conditions of most of the people living there.

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Socio-Economic Transition, Occupational Diversification and Policy Intervention among the Birhor PVTG in Purulia District, West Bengal

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Abstract

The Birhor community, identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), is one of the most marginalized indigenous communities of India. This paper, based on historical, socio-economic, and policy approaches, explores the transformation of Birhor communities of Purulia district of West Bengal, India. Through longitudinal data (1956-2017), survey research, and policy evaluation, it examines the occupational pattern, educational achievement, income pattern, and policy intervention outcomes of Birhor communities. A mixed qualitative methodology using longitudinal secondary data (1956-2017), ethnographic field research, household interviews, and policy document analysis are applied here. A transition policy mediation model will be used to interpret socio-economic and cultural change. This paper suggests a structural transformation of Birhor communities from forest-based subsistence economy to wage labour and diversified occupations, and improvement in literacy and economic status over time. However, it also

suggests that poverty and policy and governance limitations are major challenges for the Birhor communities of Purulia. This paper suggests that the transformation of Birhor communities is not a linear process but rather a complex interaction of modernity and environment.

Keywords: *Birhor, PVTG, occupational diversification, socio-economic transition, tribal development, Purulia.*

Introduction

India is home to different indigenous populations with unique socio-cultural and economic characteristics. The Birhor is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group that ranks lowest in terms of literacy rates, pre-agricultural economic techniques, and economic deprivation. The Birhors are a group of forest dwellers and hunter-gatherers whose lives have significantly changed because of modernisation, deforestation, and government intervention. The vulnerability is not just linked through regulations and principles—they theorised vulnerability as a fundamental part of the entirety of human existence due to being human (social beings with bodies). Vulnerabilities can arise from being human; however, there are other vulnerabilities associated with the inability to access health care facilities, which arise from the unfair and ungenerous prioritisation of how society treats people. It is then, very critical to examine the socio-economic condition of the Birhor tribes, their employment, way of life, income status, level of education, eating habits and standard of life (Dhibor et. al. 2012). Oraon (2024) found that the social structure of the Birhor tribe is complicated and dynamic, governed by their traditional lifestyle, cultural beliefs, as well as the environmental conditions. However, with growing acquaintance with the conventional society and changing socio-economic dynamics, the social structure of the Birhor tribe is also evolving.

Purulia is a district in West Bengal that houses a large number of Birhor populations and is therefore a significant case study of socio-economic changes in India. The earlier studies on this region were mainly focused on economic changes and policy interventions individually. However, few studies have explored historical changes in terms of occupation, economic and social mobility, and policy interventions simultaneously. The indigenous populations of South Asian countries are facing rapid changes in terms of economic and social mobility because of environmental changes and policy interventions. The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are at the lowest rung of economic and social status because of historical deprivation and ecological vulnerability. The Birhor community, historically forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers, represents a classic case of ecological subsistence economy transitioning under modernization pressures. Traditionally dependent on hunting, rope making from forest creepers, and gathering, the Birhors are now undergoing structural livelihood transformation in Purulia district of West Bengal. Mathew and Kasi (2021) research indicated that the Birhor's lifestyle is changing from that of hunter-gatherers to a more settled existence; however, they are also beginning to adopt the new cultural/social way of life in their resettlement area.

Although some studies have explored tribal livelihood diversification and development policies individually, few have attempted to integrate occupational diversification, educational mobility, cultural change, and policy intervention under a single framework of analysis. This study does just that.

Literature Review

Govt. of Orissa (2010) in a publication of a book on the Birhors by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs mentioned Birhor people as

rustic, alcoholic and vibrant tribals. They are a little-known, simple, wandering, cautious, and God-fearing tribal group living in forests. Birhoors are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who exist as part of the early human life development stages in the forest. The Birhor, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), are historically nomadic hunter-gatherers whose traditional livelihoods based in forests are at risk due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. Large-scale deforestation has affected their social and cultural structure, making it necessary for them to move away from subsistence economies and toward modern systems. Even though they are getting more exposure to modern education and government development programs, they still have a lot of problems, such as slow population growth and low literacy rates (Ghosh & Chatterjee, 2024). The Birhor tribe is moving from a nomadic, forest-based economy to a settled, agricultural one because of changes in the environment and government action. This change often means losing one's traditional cultural identity and having to adjust to working in the city (Hembrom, 2024). The Birhor tribe has always depended on the forest for rope-making and hunting-gathering, but modernization and deforestation are putting their way of life and cultural identity at risk. Land alienation, displacement, and poverty are important issues that affect their way of life, so they need to adapt to changes in the economy and society (Oraon, 2025). The Birhor tribe in Chhattisgarh lives in very poor conditions and relies mostly on collecting forest products and making baskets to make a living. Many Birhor people do not own land and live on land that they do not have permission to use in jungles, which makes them always afraid of being moved. Their nomadic way of life, which is caused by a lack of stable resources and land, makes it hard for them to make money (Nagwanshee & Kumar, 2025, pp. 2). Mathew and Kasi (2021)

discovered that the Birhor people are gradually shifting from a traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle to a more settled way of life, embracing new sociocultural practices in the study area. Because of modernization, there is a mix of a forest economy and wage labour. This change is happening because forest resources are running out and people cannot move around much, so they are looking for other ways to make money, such as farming and building. The Birhor language is an important part of Birhor culture and identity because it shows their history, traditions, and way of life.

However, because they have more contact with mainstream society and other languages, many members of the Birhor tribe are also bilingual or multilingual and may also speak Hindi or other regional languages (Oraon, 2024). They have received extensive training regarding their customary job of rope making; however, they have shown little interest in receiving an education. The fact that they live in isolation, are not familiar with educational paradigms, lack the means to travel long distances to get to school, and are impoverished all contribute to the current situation (Kujur and Kujur, 2018). If one speaks of negative impact, then one can accede to the fact that there has been increase in blending of culturalisation and outbound culturalisation of Hindu cultures. As a result, the new generation slowly getting cut off from their cultural heritage. The present generation, does not even have knowledge of the 'Pendra' song or the 'Damkach' dance (Premi and Kumar, 2018).

Research on tribal development in India has thoroughly investigated matters of economic transition, cultural transformation, and state intervention within marginalized indigenous communities. Scholars are interested in the Birhor community because they are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a forest-based way of life, a history of moving around, and a low social and economic status.

Research Questions

1. How has the occupational structure of the Birhor community transformed over time?

2. What role has education played in facilitating economic mobility?

3. How effective have state-led development policies been in ensuring sustainable transition?

4. How is socio-cultural identity reshaped under modernization pressures?

Conceptual Framework: Transition and Policy Mediation

The present study attempts to conceptualize the process of Birhor development in terms of the interaction among the following processes:

- Economic Transition Model: Forest economy → Agricultural Labour → Diversified Occupation

- Education-Economy Cycle: Education promotes occupational mobility → Enhances income → Increases investment in education

- Policy Mediation Framework: Accelerates developmental process → Leads to uneven outcomes due to gaps in implementation

Study Area

Table 1: Study Area – Birhor Villages

Name of the Block	Name of the Villages
Bagmundi	Bhupatipally, Bareriya
Balarampur	Bersa
Jhalda	Mahultanr, Dekai

Figure 1: Map of Purulia District block wise (West Bengal)



Source: http://purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/blocks/blocks.html

Methodology

A mixed qualitative methodology with longitudinal secondary data (1956-2017), ethnographic field research, household interviews, and policy document analysis will be used. A transition policy mediation model will be used to interpret socio-economic and cultural change.

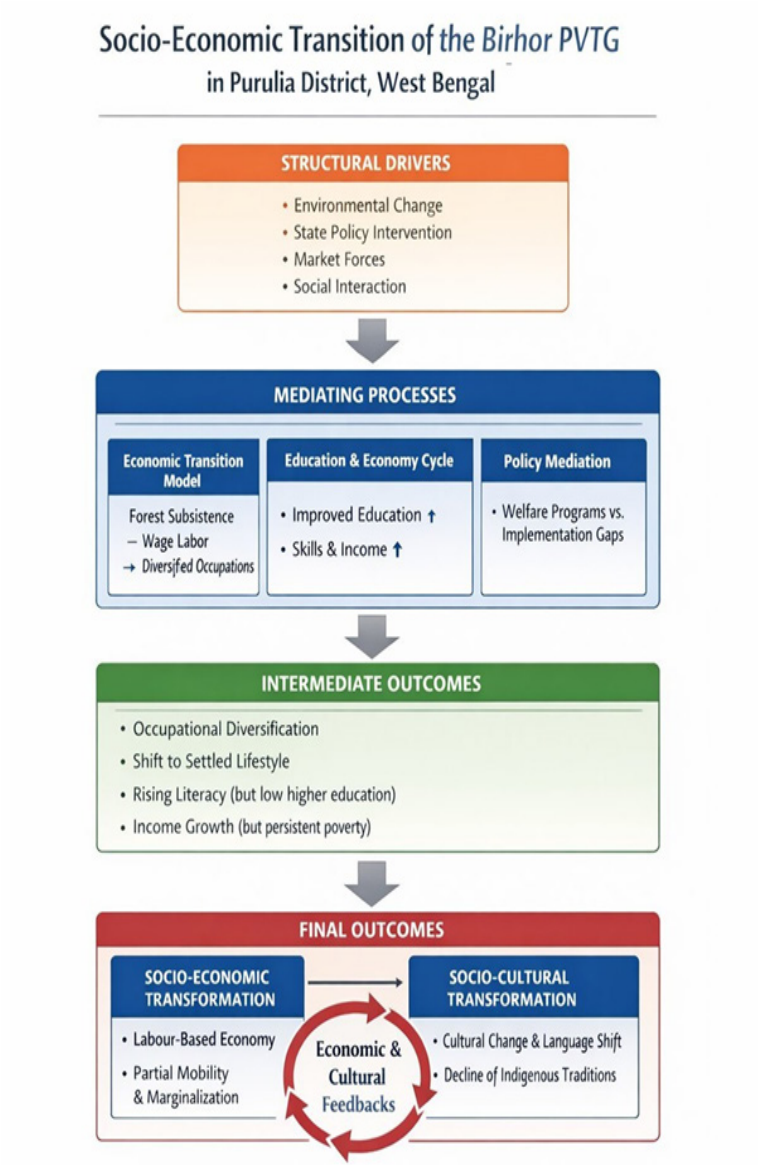


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Diagram

Conceptual Studies on Tribal Development and PVTGs

Scholars have underscored that tribal communities embody distinctive socio-economic systems influenced by ecological factors, cultural traditions, and political marginalization. Sahani and Nandy contend that PVTGs are defined by low literacy rates, a dwindling population, and restricted access to resources, rendering them vulnerable to socio-economic exclusion. Government policy papers also say that PVTGs are groups of people who use old technology, have low incomes, and rely on subsistence-level ways of making a living.

Eswarappa (2024) emphasizes that state-led development initiatives for PVTGs seek to enhance welfare through affirmative action and livelihood assistance; however, challenges in implementation frequently hinder their efficacy. Research on tribal development underscores structural impediments, including isolation, exploitation, and inadequate infrastructure, that sustain poverty within vulnerable tribal populations. These studies offer a theoretical framework for comprehending socio-economic transformation within marginalized tribal communities.

Ethnographic Studies on the Birhor Community

According to the earliest anthropological studies on the Birhors, they can be categorized as forest-dependent hunting-gathering tribes with a semi-nomadic mode of living. According to Premi (2014), the Birhor population constitutes one of the smallest tribal populations in India with distinct physical as well as cultural characteristics. In addition, they have high socio-economic vulnerability. In ethnographic studies on Birhor society, various aspects of Birhor society have been discussed. For instance, Premi (2014) discussed the family structure of Birhor society, their marriage traditions, religious beliefs, and cultural taboos. Such studies indicate

the importance of traditional institutions in Birhor society. According to various studies, Birhor culture is considered to be highly rooted in oral traditions. In recent ethnographic studies on Birhor society, it has been indicated that spiritual traditions play an important role in shaping their worldview.

Economic Transformation and Livelihood Change

Birhor economy heavily relies on rope making. High variety of fibres are harvested through the cutting and removing strips of bark from the trunks of mature siali (lama bayer) creepers. An open-air shop is also in place outside their Kumbhas (centres of Birhor life) and mostly underneath trees where they create all types of finished rope products, including slings, nets, bags, and small baskets (*topas*) (Govt. of Orissa, 2010). However, the surveyed villages had a very few families dependent on rope making.

Significant literature is available on the transformation of tribal people from traditional subsistence economic systems to diversified economic systems. The available literature on Birhors suggests that they are gradually adapting to new economic systems by shifting from hunting and gathering activities to settled agriculture and wage-based economic systems. Substantial literature is accessible on traditional economic systems and how tribal people are dependent on forest collection and craft production activities, which are still part of tribal economic systems. However, with modernisation and deforestation, traditional economic systems are facing a decline.

The available literature suggests that occupational diversification is a result of adaptive strategies of tribal people in response to changing socio-economic conditions. These adaptive strategies often involve a shift from subsistence economic systems to market-based economic systems.

Language, Culture and Identity

Language is also crucial in sustaining tribal identity and culture. Birhor is a Dravidian language central to the Birhor tribe's culture and daily communication. While many members now also speak Hindi or regional languages due to external contact, it remains a vital link to their identity through its various dialects (Oraon, 2024). Research on the Birhor language suggests that it is part of the Austroasiatic language family and highlights its vulnerable status because of its reduced use by younger generations. Linguistic research projects focus on the documentation and preservation of vulnerable tribal languages and involve community participation.

Researchers suggest that cultural change in tribal societies occurs through the gradual adoption of mainstream religious systems and traditional systems of belief. This results in new cultural identities that emerge as a result of contact between tradition and modernity.

Tribal Development Policy and State Intervention

Development schemes for tribal welfare undertaken by the government include the generation of employment opportunities, agricultural development, and infrastructure development. According to various policy studies, the primary aim of the development schemes for tribal welfare is to encourage income generation and economic self-sustainment among the vulnerable tribal groups. There have been various studies that have highlighted the disparity between the formulation and implementation of the tribal welfare policy. The structural barriers include non-participation, institutional barriers, and lack of awareness. Loss of forest has taken a toll on the livelihood and economy of Birhor people. Thakur and Sharma (2012) found that the deforestation of

their habitats has destabilised the Birhor people's economy by cutting off traditional income sources. While they have attempted to transition to agriculture as an alternative, they face significant hurdles due to poor soil quality and a lack of farming expertise.

Historical Economic Structure of the Birhors

The name "Birhor" comes from a combination of two words from the Mundari language. "Bir" means forest, while "Hor" means man. The Birhor are one of the 75 Primitive Tribal Groups of India and are considered to belong to the Proto-Australoid group of peoples; linguistically, they can be classified as Austro-Asiatic. According to Birhor tradition, they are descendants of the Sun. They also believe that they are related to the Kharwar tribe (the Kharwars also claim to be descendants of the Sun) (Thakur and Sharma, 2012). Traditionally, the Birhor economy is based on:

- Hunting and gathering
- Rope making from forest creepers
- Collection of forest produce
- Semi-nomadic way of life

Their socio-economic activities are closely related to the ecology of the forest, with minimal involvement in agricultural activities. However, with the process of deforestation and the development of modern forestry policies, there was a change in the occupation of the Birhor.

Occupational Diversification and Economic Transition

- In the traditional phase, they adopted the livelihoods of hunting and forest collection, rope making as the principal occupation, and nomadic lifestyle.

- In the transitional phase, they have already adopted the livelihoods of agricultural labourers, daily wage labour, sharecroppers, and animal husbandry.

- In the contemporary phase, they nowadays adopt the livelihoods of casual government work, participation in the self-help group, craft production, and wage labour.

The distribution of the workforce has shown that the livelihoods of rope making are declining, but those of wage labour and agriculture are increasing.

Educational Transformation

The level of literacy among Birhors is increasing over time. More people are going to primary school, and a small percentage have reached higher levels of learning.

The role of education is significant in occupational diversification, economic mobility, social awareness, and skill formation. However, dropout rates and low rates of higher education participation are of concern.

Poverty is increasing among Birhors despite an increase in their income level. A large percentage of Birhors is living below the poverty line. They are suffering from a lack of job security and are dependent on seasonal demand for labour.

Regarding government intervention and policy outcomes, it has been observed that the government intervention is helpful for housing facilities, electrification, education, vocational training, and employment generation. However, there are many structural issues with government policies and programmes, for example, a lack of transparency in policy implementation, less participation of Birhors in local governance, poor infrastructure, and monitoring of development programmes.

Structural Drivers of Change

The major factors which have influenced the transformation include deforestation and environmental changes, the advent of modern education, rehabilitation measures by the government, the impact of market forces, and contact with non-tribal groups. It is these factors that have influenced the transformation of Birhor livelihood in recent times.

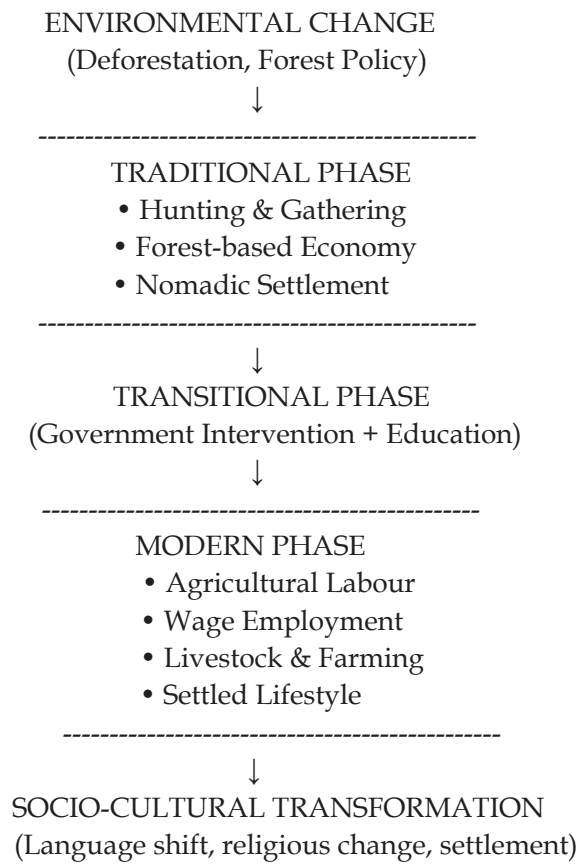


Figure 3: Transition Model of Birhor Socio-Economic Transformation

Major Findings

1) Birhor economy is in the process of transition from forest subsistence to labor-based economy.

2) Occupational diversification is an indication of the adaptation process to modern economic forces.

3) Education plays an important role in economic mobility.

4) Policy interventions have shown some success.

5) Structural marginalization continues to persist, not with standing the development efforts.

Spatial Distribution and Demographic Characteristics

The field survey conducted by BKGC, Department of Geography in 2025 in the villages of Bhupatipally and Bersa in the Purulia district provides some insight into the demographic characteristics of the Birhor population. There are five villages in the Purulia district where the Birhor population lives, namely Bhupatipally, Bareriya, Bersa, Mahultanr, and Dekai. These villages fall under the blocks of Bagmundi, Balarampur, and Jhalda, respectively. The total number of Birhor people living in these villages is around 443, with 119 families.

Table 2: Population of Birhors in Bhupatipally, Bareriya, Bersa, Mahultanr and Dekai in 2019-2020.

Sl No.	Villages	Blocks	Number of Families	Total Population	Male Population	Female Population
1	Bhupatipally	Bagmundi	72	278	148	130
2	Bareriya	Bagmundi	23	72	39	33
3	Bersa	Balarampur	10	39	21	18
4	Mahultanr	Jhalda	10	41	22	19
5	Dekai	Jhalda	4	13	7	6
Total			119	443	237	206

Source: Singh.S.S, A Book on the Primitive People of India, April 2022.

Bhupatipally has the maximum number of families, i.e., 72, among all the villages. The next village with the maximum number of families is Bareriya, with 23 families, and Bersa has 10 families. The villages of Mahultanr and Dekai have a smaller number of families. The demographic characteristics indicate that the families are small, with an average of 3 to 4 people living in each family, owing to the economic backwardness of the population.

The age–sex pyramid made from the primary survey of 46 households (243 people) shows that the population is mostly young and has a slightly higher percentage of females than males. These demographic patterns show that the population is at risk and that the settlements' demographics are slowly becoming more stable.

Transformation of Settlement Pattern and Housing

One of the most visible outcomes of the field survey is the shift from temporary forest dwellings to permanent dwellings. The Birhor people used to stay in temporary dwellings called "Kumbha." These dwellings were made up of leaves, branches, and other things that could be found in the forest area. The dwellings were designed in such a manner that they could be easily disassembled and reassembled, which was suitable for their previous nomadic lifestyle.

However, the traditional Kumbha dwelling system is declining rapidly due to modernization, rehabilitation, and forest restrictions. The traditional Kumbha dwelling system has been replaced by permanent dwellings such as bricks in the Birhor area, which is the result of government initiatives such as the PM Awas Yojana scheme. The shift towards permanent dwellings has been observed in the Bhupatipally and Bersa villages, where the Birhor people are living in small concrete dwellings with the help of rehabilitation schemes. Though only a few people are able to construct the traditional Kumbha dwellings, the elderly people are aware of the traditional dwelling system.

Livelihood Structure and Occupational Transformation

Hunting, gathering, and rope making are some of the activities the Birhor tribe used to engage in while in the forest. Birhor is derived from Bir, which means forest, and Hor, which means man, thus showing the tribe's affinity towards the forest.

Traditional occupations have been studied in November, 2025. According to the interviews, the Birhor tribe's main economic activity was rope making. The tribe used the fibres of a plant known as "chihor," which was found in the forest, to make the ropes. These ropes were used for agricultural

activities, cattle, and extracting water from wells. They were also sold in the market.

The Birhor tribe was engaged in activities such as rope making, hunting, and gathering. Specifically, the tribe hunted monkeys, rabbits, and gathered fruits, honey, and herbs. The tribe showed high sense of community through the activities of the hunting team, where the food was shared equally from the hunting activities.

Occupational Diversification

However, as per the study, the traditional occupations have drastically reduced due to:

- Exhaustion of the resources found in the forests
- Government regulations regarding the forests
- Competition from synthetic products in the market

It is for this reason that the Birhor community is increasingly becoming involved in wage employment, agriculture, animal rearing, and collection of products from the forests. Currently, the Birhor community from the nearby villages works as wage labourers and/or farmers. As part of the government rehabilitation programme, the Birhor community has also started rearing cattle such as cows, pigs, and goats.

Education and Linguistic Challenges

The educational system of Birhor people is still at an early stage. There is a primary school at Bhupatipally where education is provided up to Class VII. A junior high school is also there, from where four Birhor girls passed Madhyamik a few years ago. Now as per reports, they have left their studies and now work as labourers. However, there are several challenges that hinder the progress of education. One of the biggest challenges is the language. While education

is provided in Bengali, Birhor people speak Birhori, which makes learning difficult.

The statistical findings of the survey indicate that about 20-25% of Birhor people have completed primary education. About 7% have completed middle education. Only 2-3% have completed secondary education. Less than 1% have completed higher education. There have been recent developments despite these challenges. An important milestone has been reached in the educational journey of Birhor people, as some of them have begun to take up secondary and higher education. First-generation learners have benefited greatly from Maitreyo Paathshala, a programme at Bersa village, where mid-day meals and education are provided.



Photo 1: Bhupatipally High School



Photo 2: Village Paathshala building, Bersha

Cultural Practices and Social Organization

Strong communal traditions and close kin relationships are the basis of the Birhor tribe's distinct cultural identity. Birhor communities are small, with extended family relationships, thus promoting communal work and cooperation. Despite following patrilineal and patriarchal lineage, Birhor women preserve high social standing and near-equal roles in household management. They share responsibility for finances, community customs, and parenting decisions, while also supporting the home through domestic labour and traditional resource gathering.

Religion and Rituals

The Birhor community holds certain religious beliefs based on the animistic tradition and the influence of Hinduism. The Birhors believe in the worship of nature deities and ancestral deities of the forests, mountains, and rivers. The ceremonies and rituals take place under the guidance of a religious figure named "Naya," who performs sacrificial ceremonies during the festivals.

One of the major festivals of the Birhor community is the Maghi Sim, which falls on the full moon day of the Magh month, i.e., Maghi Purnima. According to Ghosh and Chatterjee (2024) Birhors have a belief system that revolves around different types of supernatural beings, including a number of spirits and gods. Among the gods of the Birhor, Sing Bonga (the sun god) and Dharati Maa are believed to give them safe, healthy lives and good crops. In addition to believing in these gods, the Birhor people also believe in witchcraft and consult with traditional diviners for assistance. The Birhor practice their religion through ceremony and have set aside certain periods during the year to celebrate life with different types of festivals (e.g., hunting festivals, such as Phagun and

Sarhul) that culminate in some form of religious dance for each festival.

Oral Traditions and Language

Birhori is an unwritten language, and it is a dialect spoken by the Birhor people, who belong to the Austro-Asian linguistic family. Folk tales, songs, and historical stories are passed down from generation to generation in oral form, but due to their interaction with mainstream society, most Birhor people have become bilingual, speaking Bengali and Hindi, which has eventually crept into their way of speaking.

Health Practices and Use of Medicine

Traditionally, the Birhor tribe used herbal medicine and healers, known as Ojha and Gunin, to treat diseases. Plants collected from the forest are used as medicine to cure common diseases. From observations, there has been a gradual shift towards modern health care practices, especially for serious diseases, over the last decade. However, the traditional method of treatment is still used along with modern medicine. Commissioner Report for ST/SC, (1986-87) mentioned that the Birhor people and other primitive tribal groups are marked by extreme veracity with a "fragile" build and extreme levels of malnutrition and social isolation. Thus, many aspects of their general health are negatively influenced by several factors: Waterborne Diseases: Consumption of polluted water frequently leads to the following diseases: diarrhea, dysentery, and other gastrointestinal disorders. Chronic and Infectious Diseases: There are many alarming infections and chronic conditions in the local population, such as (i) malaria (including cerebral malaria), (ii) tuberculosis, (iii) leprosy, (iv) epileptic disorders, and (v) iron deficiency anaemia. Nutrient Deficiencies: Nutrient deficiencies are common; for example, children frequently develop rickets, and many

women within the Birhor community experience goitre due to iodine deficiency. Genetic Disorders: The main genetic abnormality occurring within the Birhor community is the expression of sickle cell anaemia and the G-6-PD enzyme deficiency associated with sickle cell anaemia. The expression of both genetic conditions is increased in populations living in malarial areas. Demographic/Social Factors: High rates of infant mortality and the distorted sex ratio have resulted in a shortage of females, which is critical for the long-term viability of the Birhor community.

The collective knowledge of plants possessed by the Birhor tribe goes beyond just gathering and using them. The Birhor have knowledge about different types of plants, their distinct features, and where they are located. Overall, the amount of ethno-medicinal information that the Birhor possess is remarkably high and, therefore, their expertise extends past medicinal purposes. An excellent example of this expertise includes their knowledge regarding under-utilized protein sources from plants that could provide alternative food sources for them (Mairh, Mishra & Kumar, 2009). Although the above example is from Jharkhand and Chhattishgarh, the surveyed villages displayed remarkable awareness about the efficacy of modern medicines among the tribal people.

Cultural Transformation and Contemporary Challenges

The findings have shown that the Birhor community is currently going through a major socio-economic and cultural transformation. The factors contributing to this transformation include:

- Deforestation and changes in the natural environment
- Government rehabilitation efforts
- Development of education

- Association with non-tribal people
- Inclusion of the market system

Although the growth in the provision of housing, education, and medical facilities is improving levels of access for this community, negative social impacts related to community fragmentation have occurred as well. Specifically, there has been a loss of culture relating to shelter, language, and natural surroundings. With that said, some cultural values remain that the Birhor continue to maintain. To promote the welfare of these beneficiaries, the Government of India has launched numerous initiatives, ranging from agriculture (Birsa Awas), livestock (goats and chickens), and tools (spades or Gainta) to pensions for seniors affected by poverty. The government also provides social security schemes for both men and women. In addition, several initiatives help them raise goats and chickens for daily consumption and as sources of income. Unfortunately, many men struggle with intoxication and spend family income on it (Ghosh and Chatterjee, 2024).

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the Birhor community living in the Purulia district of West Bengal is currently experiencing a major socio-economic and cultural transition in their lifestyle. Traditionally, their livelihood was based on forest resources, including hunting, gathering, and rope-making activities, which have gradually converted to settled agriculture, wage work, and cattle rearing due to environmental changes and rehabilitation policies of the state encouraging them to settle and adopt alternative livelihood options. Unlike previous studies, rope making is no longer a popular livelihood option among the Birhors of Purulia district.

The demographic study of the Birhor settlements in Bhupatipally and Bersa villages shows that the population is small and vulnerable with limited household sizes and economic resources. The government initiatives in providing housing to the population, such as the PM Awas Yojana, have led to a shift from traditional temporary dwellings such as the 'Kumbha' to permanent concrete dwellings, which show a clear shift from nomadic lifestyles to settled lifestyles in villages. The disappearance of traditional dwellings has shown the beginning of the end of indigenous knowledge systems. The educational development in the Birhor community has shown slow progress in recent times. The language barrier between the Birhori mother tongue and the Bengali medium of schooling, poverty, and the absence of secondary schools in the surrounding areas have shown that the educational development in the community has not progressed much. The emergence of first-generation learners has shown the beginning of change in the community with the involvement of NGO initiatives in the area.

The cultural practices of Birhors still show evidence of a strong community tradition based on animistic beliefs, oral traditions, and kinship-based social systems. The celebration of Maghi Sim, traditional hunting activities, and the role of ritual specialists such as Naya are indicative of a continued cultural identity in spite of increased exposure to modern culture. However, modernization, linguistic assimilation, and reduced forest dependency are also having a gradual impact on the cultural scene of the Birhors.

All things considered, the Birhor community in Purulia can be seen as a transitory society caught in the middle of conventional means of subsistence and contemporary development processes. Though there are some positive developments in terms of living conditions, the Birhor

community still struggles with the consequences of poverty, education, and culture. Thus, sustainable development in the Birhor community can be best achieved through culturally appropriate policies that emphasize skill-based employment, education, indigenous culture, and the involvement of the Birhor community in development processes.

Such an approach would not only improve economic resilience but also help maintain the cultural heritage and social identity of one of India's most vulnerable tribal communities.

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Linguistic Displacement and Cultural Marginality: Translating Tribal Experiences in Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty

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Abstract:

This paper intends to critically examine the representation of tribal communities in the fictional writings of Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty, interrogating the political and ideological challenges that their linguistic strategies pose for translators. Both authors deploy language as an instrument of resistance against dominant social, administrative and historical discourses and this paper situates that deployment within the broader framework of language movements in postcolonial India, the authors' own socio-political locations and the institutional conditions governing their translation into English. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's concept of the small voice of history, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorisation of linguistic decolonisation and postcolonial translation theory, the paper argues that the movement of these texts into English is not a neutral act of cultural mediation but a site of multiple, historically determined power negotiations. The politics of representation operative in these translation projects is analysed in terms of both agency and historicity, with attention to the publishing market, literary reception and the specific translatorial decisions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bikram Das and Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, among others.

KeyWords: *postcolonial translation, subaltern representation, tribal literature, small voice of history, language movements, politics of representation, decolonisation*

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty occupy singular positions in the literary histories of their respective languages. Devi belongs to a generation of Bengali writers who came to maturity in the aftermath of Partition and found themselves at once heirs to the rich tradition of the Bengal Renaissance and confronted with the challenge of writing honestly about an independent India that had failed its most vulnerable citizens. Her literary career was shaped not by the drawing rooms and little magazines of Calcutta's cultural establishment but by firsthand acquaintance with bonded labour in Bihar, the Lodha and Kheria communities of West Bengal and the tribal uprisings that official history had silenced. As Bodh Prakash argues in his essay "Mahasweta Devi and the Tribal", her writings over more than three decades on the lives and tribulations of the Mundas, the Oraons, the Shabars, the Lodhas and other "denotified tribes" have been acclaimed for their passionate commitment to the cause of the oppressed, drawing the attention of social scientists, literary theorists, anthropologists and numerous translators (Prakash 280). Her prose style registers this commitment directly. It refuses the aesthetic finish that the bhadralok literary tradition prized, reaching instead for a language that is, in her own formulation, driven by "an anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints" (Devi, quoted in Prakash 280). Mohanty, writing in Odia, belongs to an equally significant but differently positioned literary tradition. The Odia literary renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had produced writers, concerned

above all, with the consolidation of regional cultural identity. Mohanty inherited this tradition while radically extending its social scope. His novels about the tribal communities of Koraput and Kalahandi brought the Odia novel into territory that the mainstream tradition had largely ignored. Where earlier Odia writers had celebrated regional culture, Mohanty documented its most painful contradictions, rendering the slow dispossession of tribal communities through a lyrical prose that drew its rhythms and imagery from the oral world it was describing.

Both writers are significant not simply as authors of tribal literature but as figures who transformed the literary possibilities of their respective languages by insisting that those languages attend to the lives of communities they had systematically overlooked. This insistence is itself a political act. Prakash captures the specific nature of Devi's achievement when he argues that what distinguishes her from radical activists, anthropologists and social scientists is her "aesthetic stance" which allows her to "enter the tribal world, become a part of it and yet paradoxically also stand outside it, an observer whose vision can capture the entire experience in its totality" (Prakash 281). This double position, as immersed participant and critical observer simultaneously, is precisely what makes her work difficult to translate. It is not an ethnographic report to be rendered in equivalent prose but a formal enactment of a relationship between two worlds and any translation, that reduces it to one or the other, loses the tension that gives it its meaning. Understanding this insistence requires situating both writers within this broader context of language movements, socio-political histories and institutional literary conditions that shaped their work, as well as understanding what happens to this insistence when these texts are translated into English, a language that carries the full weight of colonial history.

Official historiography, as Ranajit Guha argues in *The Small Voice of History* (1996), is structured by a systematic suppression of subaltern voices which persist only as traces, interruptions and residues within the archive of power. Both Devi and Mohanty write about communities whose primary mode of cultural transmission is oral. Moreover, their languages are marginalised within the hierarchy of Indian linguistic culture and their histories have been consistently erased from national narratives. Their literary projects can therefore be understood as sustained attempts to recover and amplify precisely such suppressed voices, to restore to the historical record the experiential reality of communities that official discourse has rendered invisible. Prakash makes this point directly when he argues that given the orality of tribal society, Devi's works function as "an archive of tribal history, an archive which does not consist of documented papers but a living archive of memories, songs and events long gone by" (Prakash 282). When their texts are translated into English, a language in which Guha's colonial archive was largely constructed, the question of what survives this journey and what gets silenced anew acquires urgent theoretical significance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that the choice of language is never politically innocent brings out a further dimension of this problem. For Ngũgĩ, the imposition of colonial languages on subjugated peoples was not merely a practical administrative measure but "the most important area of domination," since it operated at the level of the mind itself, producing a dissociation between the colonised person's culture and the language in which they were compelled to articulate it (wa Thiong'o 16). The hierarchy of languages in India with English at the apex, then Hindi, then the regional literary languages and somewhere far below them the tribal tongues, replicates in miniature the colonial structure Ngũgĩ

describes. When Devi deliberately roughens literary Bengali with tribal idiom or when Mohanty embeds the oral rhythms of Koraput's communities in Odia prose, they perform acts of linguistic defamiliarisation that carry the charge Ngũgĩ attributes to writing in an oppressed language. They insist on the validity of a linguistic world that dominant culture has refused to recognise.

Both writers, however, occupy positions of structural privilege relative to the communities they depict and their socio-political locations are themselves significant analytical categories. Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka into a politically and literarily distinguished family. She was the daughter of poet Manish Ghatak, niece of filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Her uncle Sachin Chaudhury was the founder editor of *Economic and Political Weekly* and her husband Bijon Bhattacharya was a cofounder of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The Bengal famine, the Partition, the Tebhaga movement and the Naxalite movement of the 1970a were all formative and in 1984 she renounced her teaching post for complete commitment to social activism, editing the journal *Bortika* as a platform through which marginal people could publish their experiences unmediated. She claimed no separation between writing and activism saying, "the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies" (Devi. Trans. Chanda ix). Gopinath Mohanty's engagement with tribal communities was mediated by a different structure of power altogether. As an IAS officer posted in the tribal regions of Koraput and Kalahandi, his proximity to the communities he wrote about was an administrative proximity, sympathetic in sensibility but institutionally privileged in structure. His novel *Paraja* emerged from this encounter and the Jnanpith Award it received in 1974 marked its canonisation within the national

literary establishment, raising questions this paper will address about what such recognition does to a politically radical text.

That both writers work in regional languages about communities whose cultural world is primarily oral already implicates their writing in a prior act of translation – from the spoken to the written, from tribal register to literary standard. When these texts are subsequently translated into English, a second layer of mediation compounds the ideological stakes. Tejaswini Niranjana argues that in a postcolonial context "the problematic of translation becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power and historicity", since the very act of translating produces and reproduces "asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages" (Niranjana 01). The linguistic interventions of Devi and Mohanty cannot be separated from the language movements that give them their political charge. The formation of Odisha as a linguistic state in 1936 established the Odia language as a site of political assertion long before Mohanty began writing and his deployment of tribal dialects within Odia disrupts the internal hierarchies of a language that had itself fought for recognition. Devi's deliberate roughening of literary Bengali was a comparable challenge to the *bhadralok* aesthetic which she made explicit when she said that "for a long time now, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of the reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience" (Devi. Trans. Bandyopadhyay xviii). The tribal communities whose struggles Devi documented were simultaneously organising to secure constitutional recognition for their own languages. The Santali language was admitted to the Eighth Schedule only in 2003. The linguistic politics of their texts are therefore inseparable from these larger histories of language rights. As G. J. V. Prasad argues, India is "a major translation

area, a political, civilizational and cultural area that has formed and reformed in terms of traffic between languages" (Prasad 12) and this multilingual reality renders the choice of English as a target language politically weighted. It prioritises the readership with access to the filter language over the communities within India for whom translations into contiguous vernaculars would carry greater cultural proximity.

Language as Small Voice: Domination, Resistance and the Limits of Writing

Guha's concept of small voice offers a productive framework for reading the linguistic strategies of both Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty. The small voice is not simply the voice of the marginalised. It is the voice that dominant discourse structurally cannot hear, intelligible only within its own community's registers and rhythms. Both the authors are engaged in the formally demanding project of rendering such voices audible within the medium of literary prose, a medium that is itself shaped by the conventions of dominant culture. The tension between what the text is trying to say and what the medium allows it to say produces the specific formal distortions like the fragmentation, the dialect mixture, the refusal of standard syntax that characterise their work. Prakash describes this tension precisely when he argues that Devi "does not merely narrate" but "recreates the experience even as it is in the process of being created," fictionalising a history that "creates a resonance of experiential authenticity" unavailable to anthropological or historical accounts (Prakash 282).

Devi's story "Little Ones" stages this tension directly. The Agaria tribals the story depicts have been so thoroughly impoverished by the state failure that their adult bodies appear

to the Relief Officer as those of children. Their malnourishment has made them illegible to the very administrative gaze that is supposed to protect them. In the climactic scene, the tribals confront the officer with their bodies as testimony, refusing his designation of them as children by displaying the genitalia that prove them adult. The corporeal resistance mirrors the textual resistance Devi performs as both are acts of forcing a recognition that the dominant system has refused. Devi had articulated the historical frame explicitly when she pointed out that for "the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression" (Devi. Trans. Spivak ii). Her critique of the "Government of India" for having 'pauperized' the tribal communities is not merely deceptive. It is the foundational claim from which her entire literary method such as the refusal of the aesthetic distance, the language that is "brutal, lethal at times" derives its necessity (Devi. Trans. Chanda x). The small voice in Devi's prose materialises formally through the multiplicity of sociolinguistic registers that Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav describes in as "deliberately not integrated into a seamless whole according to any conventionally organic idea of narrative organisation" (Sen and Yadav 22). In "Shanichari", the exploitative logic of the brick kiln is rendered through the bureaucratic vocabulary of the labour hierarchy:

> 'After working here nine months you'll realize you were better off with the BMP.'
>
> '*Ai baba*!'
>
> 'Hah! The *rejas* will carry the bricks, the *patariyas* will place them, the labourers will dig the ground and the *rubbishmen* will handle the kiln. Got it?'

'*Huzoor*'

> 'You'll carry unbaked bricks in piles of ten. Each time, my *munshi* will give you a tikli….After you've got 44 *tiklis* for 440 bricks, you'll make a rupee. Now go. Eat your *roti-sabji* and go to sleep' (Devi, trans. Dutta Gupta, 49-50).

The terms such as *rejas*, *patariyas*, *tikli* and *munshi* are not translated. They are rather retained as the administrative vocabulary of a system that operates on the bodies of the poor through the very language it uses to organise them. In the worker's response the deferential address to a superior, *huzoor*, encodes the asymmetry of power as a linguistic reflex. Devi does not aestheticize this vocabulary. She reproduces its bureaucratic flatness, its indifference to the bodies it catalogues. The language of domination is allowed to convict itself. This is not illustration but formal argument proving that the structure of the sentence is the structure of the exploitation.

This formal strategy has a direct bearing on Ngũgĩ's argument about language and domination. One of the ways in which colonial language exercises its power, Ngũgĩ argues, is by providing the colonised with the vocabulary of their own subjugation, so that they reproduce the structures of their oppression in the very act of speaking. The brick kiln passage in "Shanichari" demonstrates precisely this dynamic in a postcolonial context where the labourer receives the system's terms for her own exploitation and acknowledges them with *huzoor*. Here Devi does not need to comment additionally since the formal reproduction of the exchange is itself the critique. The translator who understands this can begin to ask what formal strategies in English might preserve the same effect of the bureaucratic flatness. Thus the translator

preferred to retain the same untranslated terms carrying their charge of embedded domination rather than reaching for the safer option of explanation and domestication.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* develops a parallel argument about the relationship between written language and power. Sukru Jani's encounter with the colonial administrative legal system is one of the novel's defining scenes:

> Sukru Jani stood like a criminal in the dock and when he saw the officials writing, he felt as if the point of a knife was being dragged across his heart; for he had the tribesman's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesman could understand, and this added to his terror. Presently they nodded their heads in agreement. (Mohanty. Trans. Bikram Das, 36-37)

The scene enacts Guha's analysis of the archive precisely. The written record determines Sukru's fate but is not accessible to him. The 'nodding in agreement' that seals his fate is an act of consensus from which he is structurally excluded. Mohanty's point is not simply that Sukru is illiterate. It is rather that the entire apparatus of bureaucratic writing incorporating the legal procedure, the administrative record and the temporal reckoning of courts constitutes a world built in a language the tribal person is not meant to inhabit. When Sukru later confuses 'the sixth Tuesday' with 'the sixth day of the month', he is dismissed as 'mad'. The incomprehension that the state's own opacity has produced becomes evidence against him. This movement is precisely what Ngũgĩ diagnoses as the deeper violence of linguistic imperialism. This is not the erosion of a vocabulary but of an entire way of relating to the world, of reckoning time and authority and justice. Unlike Devi's confrontational prose, Mohanty's lyrical style which is

rooted in the oral rhythms of Koraput's communities registers this violence through accumulation and understatement, creating a tension between the beauty of its surface and the structural horror it describes. The formal challenge this poses to translation is considerable, since Mohanty's novel makes its argument through the texture of its prose rather than through direct critique and any domestication of that texture into the conventions of English realist fiction removes the very medium through which political argument is being made.

Translation as a Site of Power: Historicity, Agency and the Politics of the Market

The formal strategies through which both Devi and Mohanty make the small voice audible within mainstream literary prose are inseparable from the specific socio-political and historical contexts in which they write. A translation that fails to carry those contexts into the target text does not merely lose nuance but also reverses the direction of the original argument, domesticating the voice it was written to disturb. Tejaswini Niranjana's insistence on historicity as a dimension of the translation problem is directly relevant here. She argues that translation in a postcolonial context operates within "contesting and contested stories" shaped by the asymmetry and inequality of colonial history and that the translator's choices are always already positioned within that history. The moment in which a text is translated is not neutral. Spivak's translations of Devi, published from 1987 onwards, were produced in a specific institutional context. They were premised upon the rise of postcolonial studies as an academic field in North American universities and the concurrent appetite of western literary culture for texts that could be read as documents of Third World experience. Spivak herself was candid about this. In her "Translator's Preface" to *Imaginary Maps*, she declared her intention to prevent Devi from being commodified as a "national cultural artefact, only accessible to Indians" (Spivak xvii), a formulation that reveals the

extent to which her translation project was oriented toward a First World academic readership. The consequence was that *Imaginary Maps* was marketed internationally primarily under Spiavk's name, a market positioning that tells its own story about whose authority structures the reception of a Third World writer in global literary culture.

Bikram Das's 1987 translation of *Paraja* for Oxford University Press India operated in a different institutional frame. OUP India's decision to translate a novel about tribal dispossession in Odisha was itself an act of national canon formation. Anjana Desai has argued, when texts are labelled 'masterpieces' or 'classics' of a particular region, the effect is "a surreptitious endorsement of the hegemonic establishmentarian process of centralising and marginalising cultural expression" (Singh 57). The Jnanpith Award that brought *Paraja* to national attention performed a similar canonising function, absorbing a politically radical text into the prestige economy of national literary culture. The absence of an internationally prominent theorist to mediate its reception meant that *Paraja* circulated in the Indian English language market primarily as an ethnographic document, risking what Diptiranjan Pattanaik, in his essay "The Power Translation", identifies as the sanitisation of the 'ethnic dimension' of the text, the stripping away of its linguistic specificity in the interests of making it legible to readers unfamiliar with Odia culture. Pattanaik's anecdote about one of his own stories being dismissed in Odia but celebrated in English translation, with friends suggesting that the translator had improved it, captures the hierarchy of linguistic prestige that distorts the reception of all regional language texts in postcolonial India.

The selection of texts for translation is itself a political act whose consequences for an author's reputation are structural. Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979 and translated into Malayalam, Assamese, Konkani and Santali, has never been translated

into English. Its male protagonist Birsa Munda, the leader of the tribal uprising against British colonial rule, does not fit the feminist subaltern profile that Spivak's theoretical project and the market logic that followed it, installed as the frame for Devi's work. Seagull Books, the publisher of most of Devi's English translations, consistently framed her texts as "rich sites of feminist discourses" raising "vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class" (Devi. Trans. Spivak 298). This framing is reductive and its reductiveness is the product of a publishing logic that requires Third World women's writing to be legible within a pre-existing critical category. As Sherry Simon argues in *Changing the Terms*, translations in postcolonial contexts are "solicited and exchanged according to rules of trade and ownership which are both commercial and ideological" (Simon and St. Pierre 13). Bodh Prakash highlights this point when he argues that Devi's works transcend the typologies created by "communalists, radical activists, feminists, environmentalists and other" since "there is no one standard TRIBAL response to exploitation" and any reductive framing falsifies the complexity she renders (Prakash 289). Devi's own rejection of the feminist label was explicit as she told Nandini Sen, "I write for people who have been marginalised. Men, women and children are all equally abused when they belong to the weaker section of the society. My stories are not about women alone. I write for all oppressed people" (Sen 64). The distance between this authorial self-understanding and the market framing of her translated work is itself a measure of the power that translation and publishing exercise over representation.

This dynamic of market driven misrepresentation extends further than the selection of individual texts. It shapes the entire apparatus through which a writer becomes legible to an international readership especially the blurb, the cover image, the series in which a book is placed, the critical introduction that precedes the text itself. When Spivak

positions her translations of Devi as case studies within her won theoretical project, placing them in the section titled 'Entering the Third World' in her collection *In Other Worlds* alongside her essays on subaltern historiography and Third World women's writing, she does not merely translate a text but also assigns it a predetermined interpretive location. The reader who encounters "Draupadi" or "Breast Giver" in this context is directed toward a reading shaped by the priorities of First World academic feminism rather than by the specific political concerns that animated Devi's writing. The consequence, as Brinda Bose has argued, is a kind of 'first worlding' of Devi's Third World narratives, in which the translator's authoritative presence dangerously affects the reception of the writer and may produce a monolithic portrait of a richly varied oeuvre. Devi herself was aware of this. Thus, when informed that *Imaginary Maps* was marketed in North America primarily under Spivak's name, her response was characteristically direct. The literary market, she understood, operates according to its own logic of celebrity and authority and that logic is indifferent to the specificities of the tribal realities she had spent her life documenting. The politics of representation inherent in these translation projects cannot be understood only in terms of the translator's individual agency. It must also be understood in terms of the historical moment of translation and the institutional structures within which translators work. James Clifford's insistence in *Routes* that cross cultural translation is inevitably "enmeshed in relations of power" is a useful corrective to any account that treats the translator's choices as merely personal. Sukanta Chaudhuri's argument that any translation "must be plotted against the play of cultural politics" and "subtly modifies" the balance of the relationship between two languages is equally important (Chaudhuri 13). Therefore, translation does not simply reflect existing power relations but actively reshapes them.

Translation Strategies: The Limits of Foreignisation and the Problem of the Archive

The formal strategies through which Devi and Mohanty make the small voice audible in prose create specific and intractable problems for translators. These problems are structural, arising from the fact that the political content of the texts is embedded in their linguistic form. Therefore, any formal choice the translator makes such as to foreignise, to domesticate, to gloss and to silently normalise is also a political choice with consequences for what the text can say in its new language. The dominant debate around the English translations of Devi has centred on Spivak's strategy of italicising the English words that appear in the original Bengali, words that have entered the common parlance of Indian vernaculars through colonial contact. Sujit Mukherjee has argued that this constitutes a "rhetorically confusing device" because it marks as foreign words that are in fact thoroughly domesticated in Bengali speech, failing to communicate the historical reality of how a colonised language absorbs and transforms the coloniser's tongue. His alternative suggestion to use single quotes, leaving it to readers to determine "which thus distinguished word is mere officialise, which meant ironically and which is a convenience available only to a once colonised people" is more attentive to the sociolinguistic history that the original registers (Sen and Yadav 232). The stakes of this debate become clear in "Draupadi" where the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen uses the word 'kounter', a distortion of the English 'encounter' as shorthand for extrajudicial killing by police without knowing the original word but with perfect contextual accuracy. Spivak's extensive commentary on this moment focuses on its politico sexual significance but by doing so she overlooks what is arguably more important. This is thus an evidence of how colonised

speech communities develop their own creative relationship with the coloniser's language, a process that Ngũgĩ identifies as one of the defining features of linguistic decolonisation in practice.

In "Douloti the Bountiful", Spivak confronts a different kind of difficulty with the semantic layering of bonded labour nomenclature. Devi's original uses three terms – kamiya, seokia, beth-begar – that are not quite synonymous but describe related and historically distinct forms of unfree labour. Spivak's solution is to retain the original terms and supply English glosses in brackets:

> I am his bondslave [*kamiya*].
>
> You are his kamiya?
>
> I am his bonded labourer [*seokia*].
>
> His seokia?
>
> I am his bonded worker [*beth-begar*].
>
> Hey, what are you? Kamiya, seokia or beth-begar? (Devi, Trans. Spivak 20)

The strategy preserves the opacity of the original but at the cost of a different kind of domestication. By supplying English synonyms, Spivak implies that the terms are essentially equivalent to their glosses when, in fact, the irony of Devi's passage depends on the untranslability of the distinctions between them. The interlocutor's "hey, what are you?" is not a question about vocabulary. It is a question about the system itself and the system's refusal to stabilise its own categories of unfree labour is precisely what Devi is exposing. The concluding description of Douloti's dying body as her corpse "putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs", spread across "the

entire Indian peninsula from the ocean to the Himalayas", leaving no room on Independence Day "for planting the standard of the Independence flag" is Devi's most powerful formal enactment of what translation must try to carry (Devi, Trans. Spivak 94). The body of the subaltern as the ground on which the nation's founding narrative is built and unmade and the relationship between the grand narrative of national liberation and the small voice of those for whom liberation remained unrealised.

The translation challenges posed by *Paraja* are structurally different and in some respects more intractable. Bikram Das, the translator, acknowledges in his "Introduction" that "No translation can hope to capture the varied riches of Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya prose, vigorously colloquial and forthright at one moment and sublimely effervescent and lyrical at the next" (Das viii). What he concedes in this admission is more significant than it might appear. The political argument of *Paraja* is not carried by lexical disruption, as in Devi's texts, but is inseparable from this double quality of the prose, its capacity to hold together the lyrical beauty of tribal life and the structural violence that destroys it within a single narrative voice. Any translation that resolves this tension, choosing one register over the other or smoothing both into a uniform literary English, loses not just texture but the novel's central claim. The folk verse chanted by Dhepu Chalan after Sukru Jani's confrontation with the Forest Guard illustrates in miniature what is at stake throughout the novel. Described in the text as "a piece of doggerel which was often quoted by the hill folk" (Mohanty, Trans. Das 38), the verse reads:

The Forest Guard's the rider,

The tribesman is the horse,

And always it's the rider who

Decides upon their course. (Mohanty. Trans. Bikram Das, 38)

The doggerel functions in the novel as a fragment of collective memory circulating among the hill folk, condensing their lived experience of colonial and bureaucratic domination into a rhythmic, ironic metaphor. Its status as shared communal property, something "often quoted by the hill folk", is precisely what gives it its political force. It is not an individual observation but a collective encoding of experience, passed orally through the community as a way of making the structure of power recognisable and nameable. Rendered in English rhyming verse, it communicates the allegorical content of the power relation but loses what Ngũgĩ identifies as central to oral literature. The translation is legible but no longer small in Guha's sense. It has been amplified into a form intelligible to a global readership at the cost of the communal specificity that gave it its force as tribal speech rather than literary metaphor.

This loss is compounded throughout the novel's most politically charged sequences, in which the tribal encounter with bureaucratic writing and legal procedure is staged as an encounter between two entirely incommensurable ways of ordering reality. When Sukru Jani stands before the officials measuring the felled trees, the text registers his terror not as ignorance but as a culturally specific form of knowledge:

> …he had the tribesman's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesman could understand

> and this added to his terror. Presently they nodded their heads in agreement (Mohanty, Trans. Das 36).

What is being named here is the way that bureaucratic consensus, the nodding agreement, is produced entirely outside the tribal person's participation, yet determines his fate entirely. The nodding is not the end of a conversation. It is the end of a process from which Sukru was never included in the first place. The translator who renders both Sukru's response and the officials' procedure in the same normalised English register performs, at the level of form, the very erasure that the scene is written to expose.

This structural exclusion reaches its culmination in the scene where Sukru loses his land case because the magistrate's instruction to attend "on the sixth day of this month" was translated by the Writer and the Pujari as "the sixth Tuesday from today". When the case is dismissed for non-attendance, Sukru pleads, "Great lord, I shall die! That date is today. I was asked to come on this Tuesday" (Mohanty, Trans. Das 365). The Writer and Pujari dismiss his appeal outright. The scene is not simply about misunderstanding. It is about the way the administrative system transforms its own opacity into evidence of the tribal person's incapacity and recruits even the other tribespeople present to affirm it. Hence, the system's failure to communicate becomes Sukru's failure to comprehend and this inversion is reproduced without comment in the English translation. A formally alert translator would recognise that the scene demands a rendering that keeps the two temporal systems – the tribal reckoning of time by harvests, moons and Tuesday markets and the bureaucratic reckoning of numbered dates – audible as distinct, incommensurable registers rather than flattening both into a single neutral English.

The debt bond that finally reduces Sukru and his son Tikra to gotis i.e. bonded servants, enacts the same dynamic in written form. The deed, read aloud by the Sahukar but signed only by thumb-prints from the illiterate Sukru and Tikra, is a document of total legal precision and total communicative exclusion:

> …the members of the Second Party do hereby bind themselves jointly and severally to serve the First Party as his gotis during the tenure of the loan and thereby to be the whole-time servants and labourers of the First Party for the purpose of doing all jobs for him as he may direct, at all hours of the night and the day (Mohanty, Trans. Das 51).

The legal English of the deed is rendered with formal accuracy in Bikram Das's translation but, in doing so, it inadvertently domesticates the violence of the original. The impersonal bureaucratic register becomes simply the register of legal documents, familiar and legible to an English-language reader in a way it could never be to Sukru Jani. What is lost is the gap between the precision of the deed's language and the absolute incomprehension of the man whose life it determines. Diptiranjan Pattanaik has identified precisely this as the central risk in the translation of *Paraja*. The sanitisation of the "ethnic dimension" of the text, the stripping away of the linguistic specificity that marks the distance between the world of the document and the world of the man whose thumb-print it records.

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's approach to the translation of Devi's "Shanichari" demonstrates, by contrast, what a formally alert strategy can achieve. She found "punctuation to be one of the most effective tools" for managing the "at least half a dozen registers" in the story, used by "Shanichari,

her grandmother, the Adivasi Raksha Morcha, the Bihar military police, the press, the politicians and the brick kiln owners" (Devi, Trans. Dutta Gupta vii). What Dutta Gupta describes is not a stylistic problem but a sociological one. Devi's text maps the power structure of a society through its linguistic heterogeneity and the translator's task is to preserve that mapping. Each register is not merely a different way of speaking. It is the speech of a different position in the social hierarchy. The absence of an equivalent strategy in the translation of *Paraja* where the competing registers of tribal oral culture, administrative bureaucracy and colonial legal procedure are rendered in a broadly similar English is a measure of how much harder the problem is when the author's political argument works through lyrical accumulation and tonal contrast rather than lexical disruption. Lawrence Venuti's concept of the translator's invisibility is useful here as the translator who normalises Devi's prose becomes invisible at the cost of its political argument. In Mohanty's case, the very coherence of the English translation risks concealing the incommensurability it was written to reveal.

Conclusion

The translation of Devi's and Mohanty's texts into English is not a single event but a layered historical process, shaped at every stage by asymmetrical power relations between languages, cultures and institutions. The challenge takes a different form in each author's work. In Devi, the political argument is carried by lexical disruptions like the violent intrusion of dialect, bureaucratic jargon and tribal speech into the fabric of literary Bengali and the translator's task is to find formal equivalents that preserve the disruptive charge of each register. In Mohanty, the argument is carried by the incommensurability of two worlds held within a single prose and the translator's task is correspondingly

harder. What must be preserved is not a disruptive word but a structural gap, the distance between the legal deed that binds Sukru Jani as a goti and the world of tribal oral culture in which such a document has no intelligible place. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that language is "the most important area of domination" clarifies what is at stake when this fails (wa Thiong'o' 11). If the political force of both writers' linguistic strategies derives from their insistence on the validity of linguistic worlds that dominant culture has refused to recognise, then a translation that domesticates those strategies into the conventions of standard English performs, at the level of form, the same erasure that the texts are written to resist. Guha's framework suggests the answer is not straightforwardly negative. The small voice does not disappear but it persists as a trace, a disturbance and a refusal of full intelligibility. The comparative analysis demonstrates that structural equivalence is achievable when the translator reads a word's full cultural range. The analysis of *Paraja* suggests it becomes considerably harder when the political argument inheres in tonal contrast and structural gap rather than in a single charged term and that Bikram Das's own candid admission marks not a failure of craft but a structural limit that any honest account of translation must acknowledge.

Both Devi and Mohanty occupied the paradoxical position of non-tribal writers who devoted their careers to the representation of tribal experience. As Prakash argues, Devi is "a bridge" who makes the tribal world accessible not by creating a typology but by "becoming a part of the tribal world, its myths, songs, fears, sorrows, happiness" while simultaneously standing outside it to give it creative form (Prakash 281). Mohanty's administrative proximity to tribal Odisha created a comparable double position that of lyrical

intimacy coexisting with institutional distance. The translator inherits both these paradoxes and must answer them anew. As Tharu and Lalita argue in *Women Writing in India*, translation from any Indian regional language into English represents a regional culture for a more powerful national and still more powerful international culture and the power struggle that generates out of this representation often results in the flattening of discrete multiplicities within the text. These texts ask to be heard, not merely to be read and that demand extends to the translator who carries them across.

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"Is Love Enough?" A Critical Analysis of Triple Marginalization, Class Performativity, and the Myth of Transcendence in Rohena Gera's *Sir*

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Abstract

Indian cinema has historically utilized the domestic worker as a static narrative device, often relegated to the background to facilitate the emotional arcs of upper-class protagonists. Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018) radically subverts this trope by positioning the "subaltern"—the domestic help—as the central consciousness of the film. The narrative traces the burgeoning relationship between Ratna, a resilient young widow working as a live-in maid, and her employer Ashwin, a wealthy architect grappling with his own sense of disillusionment. The opening frames of the film do not present the vibrant, chaotic energy of Mumbai, but rather the 'shabby, congested' stillness of a rural one-room home—a space where the protagonist, Ratna, prepares to pack her life into a single bag and embark on a journey that is more social than it is geographic. The narrative arc is fundamentally rooted in a transition of space that mirrors a transition of social status. The film's preamble avoids the anticipated verticality of the Mumbai skyline, opting instead for a grounded view of a "shabby, congested," one-room rural home. As she boards a local bus, she transitions from a space of surveillance—where her identity as a widow is a "bad omen" that excludes

her from the family's photographic history—to a space of anonymity. By focusing on such shifts, this paper examines the "Triple Marginalization" of a woman who must navigate the luxury high-rises of Mumbai while remaining anchored to the restrictive social codes of the village. Central to this navigation are the material realities of her world; numerous objects in the film serve as 'platforms for empowerment', and others act as 'agents of oppression'. By analysing such symbolic markers alongside the "unaffordable" nature of love, this paper also argues that the margins drawn by society are so deeply internalised that true transcendence requires a price higher than the marginalized can often pay.

Introduction

Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018) doesn't shout about class or gender. It just lets the weight settle in slowly, scene by scene. At its centre is Ratna, a young widow who arrives in Mumbai as a live-in maid, carrying nothing but a small bag and years of village rules that are still relevant. She meets Ashwin, her employer, an architect who's quietly trying to reclaim his emotional equilibrium. But the film never pretends those silences can erase the divide. Ratna lives with what feels like three strikes against her—woman, domestic worker, widow—and each one makes the others heavier. Everyday things become loaded symbols: the lone bag she brings from the village versus the pile she leaves with; bangles she dares to wear only in the city; the sewing machine Ashwin gives her that literally opens a path forward. Gifts in the film go both ways, though not evenly. His practical, almost mentor-like offerings versus her handmade shirt carries all her unspoken dreams but still looks out of place next to his wardrobe.

Gera (2018) lingers on the tiny, painful mechanics of inequality: how "Sir" begins as a reflex of deference, softens

into something almost affectionate, then suddenly feels like a slap after their one impulsive kiss. How his encouragement can land like unintentional pity. How the village's old judgments follow her even into a high-rise, ready to pull her back if she steps too far out of line. In the end, *Sir* refuses the tidy romantic payoff. The connection between them is real, tender even, but the film insists on showing what that tenderness costs and who usually ends up paying the steeper price. It leaves you with this lingering sting: sometimes the most honest feeling in the world still isn't enough to cross a line society drew long before either of them was born.

Contrasts

Bus/train to cab rides:

The film explores the concept of marginalization through the stark, well depicted contrasts. The geographical change, from the rural to the urban, highlights the socio-cultural and economic change as well. Additionally, the shift of Ratna's mode of transport from the initial scenes, where she takes a bus or a local train, to the scene towards the end of the movie, when she hires a taxi after securing the job at the boutique, depicts the shift from choicelessness of the servant class to the freedom and affordability of choices of the working class. The newly discovered economic independence and changing social status have empowered her to hire a cab.

Bags:

At the beginning of the film, Ratna's exit from the rural landscape is distinguished by a single bag, carrying only essentials, a marker of her economic instability. However, towards the end of the movie, we see a stark contrast as she departs from Ashwin's apartment with a significant accumulation of luggage. The increase in the number of

bags suggests that she has collected professional skills, financial stability, and emotional maturity, gained from her urban experience, which is reflected through her shift from dependency to autonomy. These belongings represent the purchasing power she earned through her tailoring.

Boundaries / The Margins:

In a scene, Ashwin comes back from office at an unexpected hour and goes into his room. He finds Ratna, in front of his full-length mirror, trying out a dress that she has made for her sister Chhoti. This key moment reveals a lot about their class spatial precincts. She vehemently apologizes for crossing her boundary and rushes to her dingy quarters. Overwhelmed with guilt, she tells Ashwin that she has never been to his room, other than to clean, unlike other maids from other households, who avail the AC and TV privileges without the knowledge of their employers. More than convincing Ashwin of her innocence, she seems to reinforce self-imposed barriers that protect her reputation. In her world, the master's room is a site of labour, and to see it as a space for personal aspiration but inviting unaffordable social risk.

The symbolic full-length mirror momentarily allows Ratna to see herself not as a servant, but as a creator. Ratna's momentary claim in Ashwin's room was the result of the blurring lines between them. However, the intensity of her apology and her guilt suggests that for the subaltern, even the act of 'seeing oneself' in the master's space threatens the fragile equilibrium of her employment, not to mention the socio-economic order. Ratna insists that she is 'not like other maids', distinguishing herself through a rigid adherence to limits. She attempts to preserve her only remaining capital: her integrity. Her 'choicelessness' forces her to build a moral wall so high that even a moment of innocent curiosity feels like a criminal trespass.

The invisible margins and boundaries constructed by societal hierarchies render certain domestic spaces off-limits for the help. When other domestic workers consciously choose to transcend these lines in their employers' absence, it is the awareness of their own financial marginalization. This pretence roots from a desire to experience comfort and privilege, as a way of reclaiming the power and agency which is otherwise denied.

Ironically, when Ratna goes to her village for Chhoti's marriage, Ashwin is not hesitant to explore her room with entitlement, to quench his curiosity for certain questions which neither he will be able to ask nor will she be able to answer. At his leisure, he takes a look at how simple her life is without fearing consequence. His exploration is more of an intellectual and emotional enquiry than an intrusion, reinforcing the power dynamic and disparity in privacy. The marginalized life is a book forced open for the privileged to read, whereas the privileged life remains a guarded fortress for the marginalized to maintain. As Karmakar (2021) says "Ratna is pragmatic and aware of her social location. As a result, she is stoic and tentative with regard to her interactions with Ashwin: limiting it to her professional labour, while intermittently providing personal advice and moral support. Yet, Ratna can only enter the space of a casteless, classless world if Ashwin allows it. On the other hand, Ashwin's breaches of hierarchy are comparatively smooth: he enters her space seamlessly, going into her room with a noble curiosity, which Ratna cannot. Constantly walking on eggshells and trying to strike the right balance between being a 'person' while also being a 'servant' (which Shome achieves with brilliance), there are larger bridges to cross which 'love' cannot deliver."

Gifting:

Ashwin's gifts are empowering. The fashion magazines equip her with the cultural capital, and the sewing machine, which moves her to tears, propels her towards her career goals. They are practical, thoughtful, motivational gifts that help her bridge the chasm between her reality and aspirations. Hazra (2021) comments "For a long time, cinema in India has shown women getting behind their sewing machines when the going got rough and tough, be it in *Sir*, *Sui-Dhaaga* or when matinee mothers were shown stitching to overcome financial struggles."

Conversely, Ratna gifts him a shirt designed and tailored by her, on his birthday. He is visibly elated to have received a handmade gift from Ratna and wears it to work validating her presence in his life regardless of her class. Its monetary worth might not match up to Ashwin's but it is a tangible manifestation of her own dream. The shirt itself is floral printed, which is in stark contrast to the branded solids that he wears regularly, wrapped in glossy gift wrapping paper. It highlights the difference in taste and culture of both the protagonists, and the lack of agency for the financially marginalised and their exposure to them. This lack of exposure is the genesis for a deprived taste of the subaltern.

Master Ji and The Paid Course:

Master Ji embodies the old feudal system, where knowledge is treated as a favour granted in exchange for loyalty and servitude. However, the Paid Course represents the modern world of capitalism, where money becomes an equaliser that strips away traditional social identities and replaces them with the simple identity of a "customer." Master Ji weaponises teaching to extract unpaid labour from Ratna, treating her time as something endless and worthless. By

gate-keeping knowledge, he keeps her firmly on the other side of a symbolic, invisible wall.

On the other hand, the paid course turns education into a commodity. It allows Ratna to move from being a subaltern figure to becoming a paying consumer. Through her money, she gains access to skills and learning that were previously denied to her. She effectively buys her way into a curriculum of skill, proving that in a rigid social structure, capital is often the only agency capable of shattering the margins of class.

Other Contrasts:

A cinematic split-screen highlights the dichotomy of the protagonists' exposure and consumption of media. While Ashwin prefers global news in English, Ratna remains fastened to local Marathi dramas. Even the high-end boutiques' display windows symbolise a transparent yet impenetrable barrier between her subaltern reality and her designer aspirations. Ultimately, Ratna's agency is still tethered to traditional hierarchies as she still needs Ashwin's permission to pursue her tailoring course. This highlights the central problem of the film - the affordability of indifference towards societal norms.

Communication

A key ingredient to the poetic genius of the movie is the portrayal of communication between the protagonists. Both Ratna and Ashwin are emotionally quiet but not inexpressive. They read each other's subtle change in mood fairly well aided by an acute sense of understanding. It is evident when Ratna senses Ashwin's reluctance to take a phone call, or when he recognizes her distress regarding Masterji. They silently support each other, even without exchanging words or encroaching in each other's personal space. As the narrative progresses, their conversations evolve synchronously. For

instance Ratna asking if Ashwin misses life in America is reflective of how free flowing their conversation has become, yet they restrain from overindulging.

Ratna misreads Ashwin's disillusionment on the balcony as contemplation of suicide. She attempts to console and empathize with him by sharing her life's narrative. Ratna was thrust into an arranged marriage at the age of 19 as a result of prioritising the 'unburdening' of the daughter of the house. Her father chose to bypass her desire for studies and ignored a thorough background check of the husband's family, simply because they waived off dowry. Consequently, she lost her husband after four months of marriage to a pre-existing illness, and became a widow. From the rural perspective her life is considered 'over'. However, she moves to the city, builds a life of her own, and supports her family by remitting Rs. 4000 to them and pays for Chhoti's education. She tries motivating Ashwin by exemplifying her anecdote.

Gradually, the power dynamic levels out between them. It is evident in the conversations between Ratna and Ashwin. Both the protagonists are survivors of forced migration and their aspirations are stolen by circumstances, coincidentally triggered by death in the family. When Ratna says that "If you have to write, you can write from anywhere," it asserts that displacement doesn't necessarily mean creative death. Similarly, Ashwin doesn't shy away from speaking in English in front of Ratna, unlike others who stoop to their help's level of language to convey instructions but abuse in English. Ratna, simultaneously, upon being complimented by Ashwin, overcomes her insecurities and goes to the driver asking the meaning of the word 'brave'.

Post Ashwin's party, their mutual apologies display a poignant role reversal. Ashwin regrets the social mistreatment

Ratna endured, while Ratna laments putting him in a position that required him defending a subaltern.

Ashwin increasingly becomes more comfortable in Ratna's presence as he seats himself in the kitchen and uncharacteristically says "please" to his employee. His gestures are aimed towards bridging the social chasm. However, Ratna remains distant, her silence a defensive response to a recent boutique experience that reinforced her 'place' in the social hierarchy. While Ashwin prefers Ratna's companionship over the pretension of his own class, her internalised restrictions, honed by external discrimination, prevent her from reciprocating.

During Ratna's absence, Ashwin calls her and attempts small talk over the phone . Their shared telephonic silence is disrupted by Ratna's "koi kaam thaa?" to which Ashwin replies, "nahi". This highlights their maturing bond. In a stratified society, such a connection is viewed as a form of social suicide. Their employer-employee relationship can be seen melting in Ratna's swift return, their mutual elation, Ashwin's genuine interest in her family photographs, and the exchange of personal history.

In the pre-culmination scene, when Ratna has packed her bags and is moving out, Ashwin holds on to one of her bags and doesn't let go, neither her bag nor her, for a considerably long time. Both stand and stare at each other, silence consuming their unspoken words.

Sabina

The movie begins with a strong tension between characters which is later revealed to have been caused by Ashwin and Sabina's wedding being called off. A lot of elements, such as Sabina's support during the loss of his brother,

the social pressure of marrying her in spite of the lack of love, her infidelity, and the cancellation of the wedding, provides considerable insight into his emotional state. Ratna understandably meets these needs. Ashwin's marriage was going to be the only socially acceptable gratitude rather than one ensuing from genuine affection. He confessed that he wasn't in love with her 'enough' and that she felt it too somehow, which resulted in her meeting her emotional needs somewhere else.

Bangles

In the rural landscape a simple pair of bangles acts as a poignant symbol for a woman's social inclusion as well as forbidden luxury, the absence of which is indicative of the erasure of her femininity with the death of her husband. "*Sir* further hammers home this specious argument by focusing on the ill-treatment of women and widows that seems to be restricted to villages only; in cities, widows have the privilege of wearing bangles – a ludicrous indicator of 'progress'" (Dasgupta, 2021)

Ratna's perception of Sabina is intriguingly shaped entirely by this symbol. While one might judge Sabina for her infidelity, Ratna views her with gratitude as she was the one to encourage her, during a function, to wear bangles. It wasn't just a fashion suggestion but an act of validation, her right to live a life on her own terms. This kindness acts as a seed of motivation that germinates throughout the film, taking strong roots within her, making her embrace her individuality. When Ratna travels toward Mumbai, she claims her identity as an autonomous working woman by putting them on. Conversely, when she returns to the village, the bangles go back into the bag. This illustrates this 'city versus village' divide well. The city provides a platform for liberation but the

village remains a space of performance where she still needs to be accepted in order to survive.

Nandita

When Ashwin's sister, Nandita, discusses the fallout of his cancelled wedding, Ratna, a simple, innocent participant in a domestic routine, enters the room with a simple, professional inquiry about serving lunch. Because the conversation is in English, Ratna is unaware of the gravity of their topic. However, Nandita's sharp rebuke turns this into her vulnerability. Nandita projects her own frustrations with her 'bloody maid' onto Ratna, effectively reducing her to an interchangeable commodity. When Ashwin tries to console her afterward, she protectively retreats into the professional distance that must be maintained for her survival in such a society.

Laxmi

In *Sir*, Ratna quietly tells Laxmi Tai she hid being vegetarian, just so she could land the job in Mumbai. It's heartbreaking to see her erase who she is, piece by piece, out of pure fear of losing everything.

The incident with another maid, Laxmi Tai, in another household, and her employer's son is a brutal example of how strong our social conditioning is. Having watched his mother and society treat domestic help as sub-human, he couples physical and verbal violence as he kicks her and weaponises the English language to tell her to "Get out!" She slaps him back instinctively, and the mother explodes at her. Despite Laxmi having raised the boy like her own, he falls victim to the lessons of his social class. When Laxmi responds with the maternal discipline she would give her own son, she is rebuked by the lady of the house. It's raw proof of how early kids learn to treat the help as less than human.

In this world, servants become the receivers of all frustrations. The child's actions are unpunished and thus the abuse of the marginalized is normalized, reinforcing the idea that basic humanity is a luxury for the house help. Ratna's fear that Laxmi will be fired for doing the right thing, highlights the instability of their lives, that even a lifetime of care can be erased by a single moment of class-based ego.

The Dream

The moment Ratna's dreams meet the reality of her social standing, is central to her evolution. Ratna stands outside a high-end Mumbai boutique, ogling at the mannequin in silent longing. The shop's display window glass is a symbolic barrier of money, language, class, gender, and her married status, separating her from a world that is clearly in front of her, but out of reach. Despite financial hardship, she firmly refuses Laxmi Tai's ₹5,500 loan for a tailoring course, clinging to her fierce self-respect, wanting to build her success on her own labour. When Ashwin encourages her, saying it's all about willpower, his well-meant words, though unintentional, feel like patronising mockery. To him, dreams are simple choices but to Ratna, every step forward fights a system designed to keep her kind confined to the kitchen. It highlights that even encouragement from a person of privilege can feel like a reminder of one's own limitations and the struggles "women like her" face in the path of achieving their aspirations. Her lashing out at him is a sign that their relationship is finally growing towards equality and emotional honesty.

Her dream is finally realised in Ankita Madam's boutique. Her labours came to fruition but she needed Ashwin's "invisible hands" to hold the door open for her. This highlights that for the marginalized, merit alone is often not enough; one still requires a "favour" to bridge the gap between the terrace and the studio.

Chhoti

Like every other care giver, Ratna pours everything into her little sister Chhoti as she wants the cycle to end with her. She wants her sister to live with autonomy by transcending the class barrier, making education the step ladder to success that she never had herself. She dreams of a sister-led independent business where Ratna provides the craft and Chhoti provides financial literacy.

The conflict between the sisters arises from their differing perceptions of Mumbai. Chhoti is charmed by the city's glamour. The city's immediate, skin-deep rewards are more tempting than a long-term academic goal. Whereas, Ratna has been disillusioned, seeing through its surface-level gloss to the rigid class structures beneath. To Ratna, education is the only defence against the "Masterjis" of the world.

When Chhoti decides to abandon her studies for marriage, Ratna feels betrayed and bankrupt, both emotionally and financially. The four years of labour, the 5,500-rupee fees, and the emotional restraint required to handle everything are suddenly rendered fruitless. In the village, they only value marriage, not the certificate. Ratna's justified grief arises from regret, realizing that you can pay for someone's education, but you cannot force them to be free.

Sir – A Social Symbol

One of the strongest symbols in the film is the titular word, 'Sir'. It separates Ratna and Ashwin throughout the film as a rigid linguistic demarcation. There are three phases to 'Sir'. Initially, the conversations between them are very limited and "Sir" is always followed by a request for permission or a question, underscoring a social order, a formal requirement. By the middle of the film, the weight of the word shifts. It

softens, almost, into a title of endearment, allowing Ratna to share observations, personal anecdotes, and suggestions. The word remains and she is still Ashwin's maid, but now has become his confidante. The final phase of the film is triggered by the kiss, which makes the word "Sir" unbearable for Ashwin. He sees it as a designation that prevents them from being equals. However, for Ratna, shedding the word is socially dangerous. The climax on the terrace is where the 'autonomous working woman' finally emerges. When she receives Ashwin's call, she struggles internally and fights to shed years of social conditioning. Saying "Ashwin" instead of "Sir," isn't just saying a name, but declaring her professional and emotional equality. Having secured a job at a design house, she no longer needs to protect the servant-master hierarchy. They are now two individuals, finally speaking the same emotional language.

The Kiss

While coming up by the lift, there is a silent tension between Ashwin and Ratna. This leads them to share a kiss at the apartment. The moment is abruptly shattered by a phone call from Ashwin's mother (Mummy Ji) asking her to cook fish curry at a party at her house. It is a brutal reminder of her categorization. In a single second, Ratna is pulled out of a romantic trance and dropped back into her role as a servant. She is traumatised and apologises for things that are not her fault, almost as if for being a human and having feelings. The backlash from her own community which is rooted in jealousy that is faced by the subaltern is stronger than any other.

Ashwin wants to take her out but her primary concern is people will make fun of them. For Ratna, the people Ashwin dismisses, like the watchman, the driver, the other maids, are her entire social-survival network. The subaltern silently

internalises the margins that they have drawn around themselves, confusing it for an armour. To transcend her class through a relationship would be seen as a betrayal or a calculated move, leaving her vulnerable to labels that would make her unhirable and social outcast.

On the terrace, Ratna shares her realisation that Ashwin's wealth hasn't made him free. He is just trapped in a more expensive cage. Her answer to his question about whether she believed in God is one of the most poignant lines in the movie. She says "I have to", revealing that for the disempowered, faith isn't nothing but a survival mechanism. When the littlest luxuries are unaffordable, hope is the only fuel for life. Despite their genuine connection, their stakes for survival aren't equal. For Ashwin, the fallout of crossing the boundary is affordable, for Ratna it would be nothing but regret.

The Social Panopticon

"*Sir* does not list any last names of the characters; their caste locations have been left ambiguous. Excluding surnames is a very important directorial decision… This deliberate myth of 'castelessness' in *Sir* turns our attention away from caste to only focus on class barriers and in that, reveals the caste privilege of those who made this film, because only those with caste privilege can afford to be 'casteless'." (Dasgupta, 2021)

The moment Ashwin's wedding is cancelled, his driver suggests that Ratna find a new employment. It's an act of social policing. The trifactor marginalization comes into play. She is being judged by her profession/ class as a servant and for her gender and proximity to a single man. In the eyes of the domestic community, her presence in the house is seen as a potential scandal. Here is a reiteration of "Log kya bolenge?" (What will people say?), in an attempt to pull

Ratna back into the margins of fear. However, she draws a direct line between the city and the village when she says, "If I had listened to people, I would still be in the village, blamed for my husband's death." Ratna explains that she has already survived the community blaming her for a tragedy she couldn't control. By moving to Mumbai, she escaped a verdict and found herself a job. She refuses to move houses based on gossip and pay further attention to people whom she no longer recognise as an authority over her life.

While attending to Ashwin's guests at his party, Ratna spills wine on Ankita's dress. When Ankita hurls the word "moron" at her, she doesn't need a dictionary to comprehend the dehumanizing intent. The vitriol is transpired through to her via linguistic violence of the elite. Her apology is an instinctive survival reflex, a silent acceptance of her role as a communal punching bag. Ashwin's curt defence, "Fortunately, she doesn't work for you", shatters the social script.

Encouraged by Ashwin's compliments on the dress designed for Chhoti, Ratna attempts to cross the threshold of Sonya Dev's boutique. However, the boutique assistant frantically runs to the watchman to rebuke him for letting just 'anyone' in. The assistant effectively labels Ratna as a "security breach". Her simple attire signals that she is a non-consumer, a trespasser, an 'anyone' from the margins who need a 'social pass' to become 'someone'.

Despite Ratna's years of gruelling labour in Mumbai to fund Chhoti's education, dowry and the wedding ceremony, she is physically absent from the photographs of the event. This is not a choice, but a sentence dictated by a village mind-set that a widow's gaze is ominous or bad luck for a bride. She is allowed to provide the means for happiness, but is forbidden from witnessing or participating in the

result. Here, it can be observed that Ratna is trapped at the intersection of three powerful layers of marginality: she is a woman, a domestic servant, and a widow. These three aspects of her identity - her gender, her subaltern profession, and the stigma of widowhood create a unique form of social invisibility. These three contribute to her exclusion trifold. This Triple Marginalization means that even when she succeeds financially, she is still 'lesser' in the society.

Vicky, Ashwin's friend, serves as the voice of social realism, articulating the invisible impenetrable barriers that define class in urban India. "Another strong indicator of the caste positions of the central characters in *Sir* is when Vicky, Ashwin's friend, says "Your mom wouldn't even sit at the same table as her" when he suspects that something is going on between Ashwin and Ratna; this points to rituals of purity and pollution that oppressive-caste members observe when dining with people from castes they claim to be superior to. Forget being at the same table, Ratna and Ashwin are never even shown to eat in the same scene" (Dasgupta, 2021). Vicky blatantly tells Ashwin that he "can't date his maid". Ashwin's pleas to disregard Ratna's profession and to "put that aside" is met with Vicky's chillingly pragmatic question: "How does one put 'that' aside?" Vicky deals with Ashwin logistically, focusing on the practical impossibility of class transcendence. He probes the repercussions of their union, in business meetings, family dinners, and elite gatherings. This puts forth the profound question: if you take away the margins from the marginalized, the 'sub' from the subaltern, what remains? His assertion that "people will never let her forget she is a maid" is the most loaded statement in the film. If soul and talent were enough to transcend classes, then the very foundations of the class system would crumble. He argues that Ashwin's is being selfish because Ratna would face a loss of livelihood

and social standing as a consequence of their relationship. Pulling someone out of their social margin exposes them to a world designed to reject them. By asking Ashwin to "leave her alone," Vicky maintains a boundary that keeps Ratna safe from losing battle.

While Ratna serves guests at Ashwin's mother's house and eventually eats with the other domestic staff on the kitchen floor, the designated geography of the apartment comes to surface. For Ashwin, the internal barriers have dissolved and he instinctively and foolishly questions if he should wait for her to finish eating. Ashwin brings a westernized, egalitarian mind-set where such boundaries are fluid. His simple gesture of love becomes a source of mockery and humiliation for Ratna. She knows that in the eyes of the servant-class (watchmen, the drivers, and the other maids), she will be the one blamed for any transgression. She would lose a job, become a laughing stock/spectacle, be labelled as the seductress, a mistress, and lose her social standing in her own community. Ashwin feels guilty over her normalised mistreatment. Ratna says that she might be a simpleton/ illiterate, but she isn't a 'kept'.

When she sees that Ashwin is adamant on being together with her, she bluntly puts forth the mirror of society at his face and ours too. She says that she was only 'allowed' to work in Mumbai by her in-laws as a house-help because there would be one less mouth to feed. The monthly remittance of Rs 4,000 is an added bonus. Additionally, if word goes out about any affair in the city, her brother-in-law would drag her by the hair and take her back to the village. As a widow, she is a burden, whose husband is no longer there to take her liability, both financially and physically. Her presence in the city is a favour and a temporary privilege. Her autonomy is on a leash which is as long as her service to her family. As her final act of agency she pragmatically chooses to prioritise survival and

walks away. As she packs her bag and cries, her tears are not of fear for the future, but of grief for a loss of a truly cherished connection.

If society cannot understand or explain a subaltern's choice, it attaches a negative connotation to destroy it. When Ratna quits, Jeethu fabricates a rumour of theft which leads to her immediate criminalization. Because a subaltern woman leaving a comfortable life of her own volition is unthinkable. As a maid and a widow, she is the default scapegoat for the rumour of theft, ensuring that even as she moves on, she remains branded by her class.

Helpless, Ashwin decides to move back to The States and pursue his passion for writing. Upon hearing this, his father bluntly asks, "Have you been sleeping with your maid?" It is worse with Ashwin's father as unlike Vicky who questioned if Ashwin was "dating" her, his father immediately assumes it to be a transactional, sexual encounter. He even goes on to say that "it's a good thing" Ashwin is leaving only because he is in love. It implies that if Ashwin were merely using Ratna, he would have found a way for him to stay, as a mistress can be managed, hidden, or discarded. For the elite, using the house-help for physical or emotional labour is an acceptable, almost normal transgression. However, love is a threat because it demands equality. In the father's eyes, having feelings for someone from the subaltern class is so unfathomable that it becomes a social emergency, making Ashwin's exile the only way to protect him from the "margins". "Perhaps, that's what the additional title, 'Is Love Enough?' is trying to convey. But the film doesn't let us engage concretely with that question. If only Ashwin could stay back and break those caste-class divisions using his social position" (Karmakar, 2021). In a way it is both good and bad. Good in the sense that Ashwin empowers Ratna to overcome the barriers of a class and bad

because Ashwin himself doesn't do anything to remove the boundaries that demarcate their separate classes.

Conclusion

Rohena Gera's *Sir* lingers long after the screen fades, not because it hands us a neat happily-ever-after, but because it refuses to. Ratna walks away with her bags, content, carrying the weight of her earned skills, savings scraped together, and a hard-won sense of self keeping a piece of herself intact. Ashwin heads toward the airport, chasing the writing he once abandoned, perhaps freer in some ways, still tangled in others.

What stays, is the ache of what might have been.

In the end, when she finally says his name instead of "Sir" over the phone, it's a small but enormous act of claiming equality, even if only for a moment. The question still looms: is love enough? Even when the world keeps drawing lines around who gets to cross them? *Sir* doesn't answer it. It just asks us to sit with the truth that sometimes the deepest bonds ask the most from the ones who have the least to give. And that, quietly, is devastatingly beautiful.

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Genocide, Statelessness and Poetic Witness: Rohingya Identity and the Politics of Marginalization

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Abstract

This chapter examines Rohingya poetry as an articulation of marginalized identity shaped by genocide, statelessness and forced displacement. Drawing upon *I Am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond* (Byrne & Doja, 2019), survivor testimonies and trauma studies, the essay analyses how poetic language functions as witness literature. It argues that Rohingya verse negotiates erasure through memory, grief and ethical appeal, transforming collective trauma into resistant self-representation. By situating these poems within discourses of marginalization, exile and post-traumatic subjectivity, the chapter demonstrates how literary expression becomes a site of survival and political visibility.

Keywords: *Rohingya, marginalized identities, genocide, poetry of witness, statelessness*

Introduction

> This, then, is all. It's not enough, I know.
> At least I 'm still alive, as you may see.
> I'm like the man who took a brick to show
> How beautiful his house used once to be.
>
> – Bertolt Brecht (347)

The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. . . . the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's gasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror, most people will comply but some people will not . . . Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.

– Hannah Arendt (232-33)

The Rohingya Crisis – Disenfranchisement, Genocide and Migration

The Rohingyas are an Islamic people from the Rakhine state of Myanmar whose history has been closely connected to the province of Bengal in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. The Rakhine state, formerly known as Arakan, was a vassal state of the Bengal kingdom during the fifteenth century and that initiated the influx of Muslims, especially Bengali speaking ones, into the Rakhine state. Although Arab traders have been in contact with Myammar since before 1055, the Muslim influx was further accelerated when the Mughal emperor Shah Suja sought refuge in the Arakan state and several individuals related to Suja's entourage were inducted into the Arakan court and army. The loss of the Arakan army to the Mughals in 1666 extended this process even further. Although the political epicentre of Myanmar soon shifted away from Arakan, the region became politically and economically significant once again during the British colonial rule when Arakan became integrated with the colonial economy of nearby Chittagong (Phayre 1883). This led to not just increase in rice production and exports but also a great influx of migrants. This contributed to an exponential

increase in Muslim population in the Arakan region and in 1931, a quarter of the Arakan population were Muslims (Census 1931). However, in 1962, 14 years after Burmese independence, a military junta took control of Burma and chose to follow a policy of sustained discrimination and persecution against the Rohingyas. The Junta in fact evicted around 250000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh as early as 1978 and continuously portrayed them as foreign nationals. In fact, the Burmese Nationality Law of 1982 officially de-recognised the Rohingyas as Burmese citizens which sparked a process of discontent spanning decades which involved several insurrections, riots and brutal repression, culminating in the genocide and refugee crisis of 2015 which continues till date (Bari 2018).

Although the crisis of the Rohingyas came to international spotlight in 2015, with images of desperate people trapped in captain-less boats off the coasts of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, those attempts at migration were born out of state-sponsored atrocities which had been going on, particularly since 2012, as a result of majoritarian Buddhist nationalism on the one hand and rampant Islamophobia on the other (ISCI 2015). The report of the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI) concluded that

> …the Rohingya have been subjected to systematic and widespread violations of human rights, including killings, torture, rape and arbitrary detention; destruction of their homes and villages; land confiscation; forced labour; denial of citizenship; denial of the right to identify themselves as Rohingya; denial of access to healthcare, education and employment; restrictions on freedom of movement, and State-sanctioned campaigns of religious hatred. (ISCI 15)

This led to not only thousands of Rohingyas desperately migrating to various neighbouring countries but thousands more languishing in detention camps in the Rakhine state in deplorable conditions. The 2017 UN report of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) details a variety of physical and sexual assaults to which these Rohingyas were subjected, either by state forces or by armed thugs, often with state protection, who used knives, guns, arsons and beatings to systematically torture and execute Rohingyas under various pretexts. These attacks amount to a systematic genocide directed against the Rohingyas as a result of which around 9000 Rohingyas were killed in 2017 alone (Lee 1). As the situation worsened over the course of the next two years the erstwhile Bangladesh foreign minister Abdul Momen reported that over 24,000 people were killed, 18,000 women raped, and 1,20,000 houses destroyed, 1,15,000 houses were burnt in Myanmar's Rakhine state (Islam 159). The staggering numbers are far too gruesome for human imagination to comprehend with any degree of precision. Among those who survived more than a million took refuge in Bangladesh, either in official refugee colonies or in precarious scattered settlements in and around different places near coastal Bangladesh with more than 150000 refugees coming in the last 18 months according to a UN report published on 11 July, 2025 (UN News 2025). Significantly, life in these refugee camps is often marked by violence, insanitary living conditions, terrible heat, lack of medical care and many other typical pitfalls which create a paradoxical longing for the lushness of their lost home which, however, remains an imperilled place of genocidal devastation. In fact, the Rohingyas living in Bangladeshi refugee camps are often exploited by criminal gangs for drug trafficking, suspected terrorist activities and various other illicit happenings (Khan 98-103). As S.E. Khan remarks

> The unfolding ground realities of violence in the camps, supplemented by religious, political, and criminal interests, have intensified tensions between the host community and Rohingya... the intra- and inter-community violence and tensions create a fertile ground for non-state actors to exploit …the exploitation of Rohingya identity by various stakeholders can potentially lead to security instability in the camps with long-term possibilities of tensions between the host community and the Rohingyas. (103-104)

The Rohingyas' Poetry of Witness

In the preface to the monumental anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, the editor Carolyn Forché explains the logic behind her choice of poems and poets in the following terms:

> I decided to limit the poets in the anthology to those for whom the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract. The writers I have chosen are those for whom the normative premises of the nation-state have failed. They have not been afforded the legal or physical protections that the modern state is supposed to lend to its citizens nor have they been able to enjoy the solidarity that the concept of the nation is supposed to provide. (Forché 45)

These are precisely the same concerns which are reflected in the poetic anthology *I am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond*, edited by James Byrne and Shehzar Doja which includes various poems and translated songs by the Rohingya, especially as a result of a creative writing workshop they had organised in the refugee colonies of Cox's Bazaar in 2019. Following Forche's paradigm, these poems

bear "the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination" brought about by experiences of "exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination" (Forche 29-30).

The one element is which is most common in these poems is obviously an attestation of the inhuman violence and torture to which they have been submitted at the hands of the Tatmadaw or the Burmese army following decades of entrenched, systemic persecution. At the root of such sustained inhumanity is the ethnic vilification of the Rohingya who have been robbed off of their history, culture, language and basic citizenship rights through a series of atrocities. This is evident from the opening poem, "That's me, a Rohingya", by Mayyu Ali in which the speaker, a Rohingya, addresses a fictional Buddhist Burmese individual to highlight by contrast how Rohingyas have had to live as a nomad, an alien, a pauper or a rape victim in the face of sustained oppression and how they have been denied basic access to education, healthcare, livelihoods and security. Emphasising the fragility and hopelessness of their condition, the speaker ruefully asserts

> Even when I watch the sunrise
> I am not living like you are
> Without the fertility of hope I live
> Just like a sandcastle. (25)

This sense of "otherness' is something that many Rohingyas have had to imbibe from their birth. Thida Shania's "First Day At School" makes this agonizingly obvious as the child speaker is confronted with the declaration "This chair is not for a kalar". The speaker reflects

That day, the lesson was
Discrimination (not curriculum),
The illnesses of the heart. (28)

Such instances of discrimination and bullying would of course intensify to countless instances of assault, torture, arson, assassination and eviction. Therefore, in poem after poem one witnesses the anguished cries of multiple speakers struggling to articulate the harrowing violence they have had to witness and endure. Therefore while Yar Tin laments how "The blood-scented oxygen inhaled/Made my skin limp and lifeless" (29), Pacifist Farooq mockingly states that "In Arakan they kill and bury you/Under the treasure of human rights" (32), RO Pacifist describes his life in Myanmar as

a hell, blooded
with terror sounds,
explosions –
ash of villages burnt down,
over decades. (36)

Such images of fire, bullets or death by drowning keep punctuating these poems as the authors reflect on the trauma that Rohingyas have had to collectively withstand as they were persecuted by the Burmese army or local Buddhist Burmese population or the ways in which they died while fleeing their villages by road or sea or the trauma of witnessing the murder of one's closest kin. In Yasmin Ullah's poem "Birth" the speaker acts as the collective voice of these traumatised Rohingyas and states

I was born among rows of dead infants
burned alive, thrown into fire
drowned in water

fallen into the river
to escape the punishment
of crimes they didn't commit. (50)

These lines serve to underscore the utter senselessness with which the Rohingyas have been targeted for decades and have been subjected to most brutal forms of violence. One poem by Mayyu Ali mimics the voice of a mother who has had to watch her husband and son being burnt to death and yet considers herself fortunate and states:

At least I didn't have to see the corpses like others did,
Nor did I have to bury them.
They're kind killers. (44)

Such piercing oxymoron makes us aware of the extent of disorientation and mental disfigurement which the survivors have had to cope with. Quite naturally therefore in their poems either we see recurrent cries of "Save me/ Save me/Save me" (45) or there are anguished, unanswered questions – "Tell me what we are guilty of!" (59) – which keep voicing a thirst for some rational explanation in a world ravaged by meaningless violence devouring Rohingyas of all ages. All that remains is a pathetic recognition of the destruction of their homeland and an ensanguined catalogue of irreparable losses without the possibility of any restitution, manifested through the refrain "My Arakan/torn to pieces" (46).

Of course such humanitarian crises have been particularly horrid for women and children who have been subjected to unimaginable physical and mental torture. Alongside references to mothers watching their children being killed there are also in these poems repeated references

to women being gangraped and subjected to barbaric violence. In one such poem the speaker recounts,

> The last one said
> I am not going to use my penis on you
> Instead he used his knife.
> They set me alight and left us for dead. (44)

The impact of such dehumanizing violence has also birthed hundreds of orphans whose infernal childhood plunges them into a world of bewildered vulnerability. While one such orphaned speaker asks

> Why do I remain in this world?
> who could love me-like my mother? (34)

Another speaker keeps asking "Dad, why won't you come back?... Dad why don't you talk to me?... Dad why can't you hug me?" (35)

Such poetic articulations are entirely in keeping with the various testimonies of Rohingya survivors which vividly capture the extreme inhumanities which they had to suffer. Along with the recurrent references to "*Desh vagi diche/gram tuli diche*" (they've broken our land and evicted our village) we find harrowing details of orchestrated violence:

> Burma government wanted to establish a military base in Labadok, right there where we were living…The very next day, they set fire on one side of the village, and from another side they attacked the village people. Family after family were evicted. The whole Labadok village was destroyed. Many … many people were killed, some died out of hunger on their way to find a shelter. Some got their children missing … old people died … and family members got missing. (Farzana 98)

This testimony from one Md. Ismail Hussain is only one of countless such other experiences. Whether it is Momtaj Khatun talking about her brother being killed by the 'Mogs' who "literally cut him into pieces" (Farzana 106) or Jobeda Begum talking about how her daughter committed suicide after being raped by Rakhine men (Farzana 104-105), the experiences of manifold oppression their memories attest to find their equivalents in the poetic articulations of *I am A Rohingya*. As RO. B.M. Hairu writes

> The Arakan turned into genocide
> Non-stop raping and murdering
> Some were thrown screaming into the fire.
> The world outside was too quiet to hear. (59)

This sense of all-encompassing destruction is something that repeatedly appears in Rohingya poems, as evident from the following lines by Yasmin Ullah

> Blood swims through my veins,
> the agony of women
> shapes me into a living body –
> women who, in very attack, every massacre,
> were reaped, their souls assaulted – (50)

The fact is that such memories of injustices continue to haunt the lives of the Rohingyas whose vulnerability continues to be shaped by these infernal pasts. This is evident from the recollections of Nur Begam:

> My neighbor, one lady short in height and fat … another lady from same village and I, we [three of them] went to collect firewood from the nearby jangle. There some Mog men chased us. They had knives with them. I and another lady managed to escape as we ran towards

> the jangle for our life. But that short lady she could not make it. The Mog (Rakhine) men, three of them raped her there. They stabbed her many times, (silence) … and left her like that. Oh … re! boro julum [severe oppression] … on females! (Farzana 107)

No wonder then that Rohingya poems testify to a sense of unfathomable generational trauma, particularly those suffered by the women –

> bleeding internally, excessively from
> their gang rapes
> their tortures
> their throats slit,
> their flesh sliced,
> hours before fleeing (51)

In many cases, such experiences create a scarred consciousness akin to the victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As Dr. Rowan explains in his discussion of PTSD,

> Such individuals experience a damaged sense of self, chronic guilt and shame, feelings of ineffectiveness, and a chronic sense of despair and helplessness…Survivors are 'disconnected from the present' and continue to react to life experiences as if they were anticipating, experiencing, or responding to the earlier trauma. (Rowan 30)

While a report from 2020 had already talked about approximately a third of Rohingya refugees suffering from depression (Hussain 105) J.D. Kinzie, in his chapter on "PTSD in Traumatised Refugees" in the anthology, *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical and Cultural Perspectives* edited by Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad, states

> Being a refugee almost automatically means multiple losses: the loss of family members through death or separation, but also the loss of the wider social network of extended family or village. … This often results in a loss of income and vocation, and many refugees need governmental assistance. This unfamiliar dependence can lead to a loss of self-respect and respect within the community. Finally, the refugee experiences a loss of country, culture, and familiar social institutions. Given these multiple losses, it is not surprising that PTSD is usually associated with depression. In fact, they almost always coexist. The most frequent diagnosis of refugees in our clinic is "PTSD–depression complex." (198)

This is evident from some of the Rohingya poems as well where memories of arson, murder and violence are often triggered by everyday objects of the present that drag the refugees back into the vortex of the traumatic past. Therefore Ahtaram Shine desperately cries

> I'm trying to free myself
> from the terror of torture.
> I want to erase my mind. (62).

In the same vein Pacifist Farooq refers to the "Heart's Burning Smell" and how "The burning smell just keeps on spreading" (65). Perhaps the most telling representation of this recurrent trauma is the poem Broken Mirror which deserves to be quoted in full:

> I wake up to the speaking mirror.
> To the tragedy, the scare
> Of the hitting bullet.
> *
> I cannot dare to look

at the mirror, looking
at the mirror, looking back
*
The bullet flew towards my head.
I ducked down and ran.
The bullet smashes the mirror,
Shards scatter over the floor.
(Breathe –)
*
Today I see the mirror
In the taxi window
In the barbers shop. (66)

Yet, despite this inundation of traumatic memories, one of the things which keep inspiring the speakers in these poems is the devotion to a lost motherland, a lost sense of belonging, a home which is infernally distant and yet forever beckoning. Therefore, even as Yar Tin laments the multidimensional oppression meted out to the Rohingya in Myammar, the speaker still keeps recalling that "the land is fertile and the soil rich" – a clause that functions as a refrain in the poem, if only to highlight by contrast the miseries heaped on the Rohingyas. In fact, in some of the poems, this memory of a peaceful, fertile Myanmar, in the lap of nature, even acts as a foil to the refugee camps because of the claustrophobic heat and the lack of basic amenities, which were once available in Myanmar.

In Cox's Bazaar, no trees, no home, no stream
Not like our golden Arakan.
In our golden land, the trees give shade,
In Cox's Bazaar, tarpaulin offers heat. (48)

The typical nostalgia of an exile here conjures this image of a golden Arakan which is remarkably similar to the image of a golden Bengal or *Sonar Bangla* which is commonplace in both West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, the speakers themselves are also conscious of the fragility of these imaginary homelands of their yearnings and admit to the deliberate delusions of the heart:

> I keep missing a place barely know
> Home-untouched
> families I can never return to
> how I long
> for their
> hugs. (68)

Significantly, unlike the self-serving solipsism which often emerges from uncritical nostalgic yearning, the nostalgia and homing desire of the Rohingyas is always addressed to an unknown other who might be responsive and empathetic to their plight, as opposed to the betrayal and barbarism that they generally experienced at the hands of the Buddhists in Myanmar.

> I wish you knew
> through even one or two
> pictures
> so you would
> at least be able
> to relate
> and may be…only may be,
> you would cherish this place-
> as much – as I do (68-69).

Therefore, even in Thida Shania's poem "Save Me", which reads very much like a personal plea for rescue, the personal pronoun refuses to stay confined within the confines of selfhood and instead becomes affiliated with a universal sense of suffering associated with people in other places and other times, people of other nationalities and ethnicities

> No matter who he or she is,
> young, old,
> Palestinian, Yemeni,
> Syrian, Kashmiri,
> or even a Rohingya
> Save me
> Save me
> Save me (45)

Conclusion

Thus, the poems of the Rohingyas, despite confronting diabolical dehumanization, continue to articulate a universal humanism based on an ethic of care which remained so starkly absent from their own experiences in Myanmar for decades. Therefore, much like Darwish's speaker in Gaza, who continues to cultivate hope from the gunmouth of time, in the shadow of ruined apple orchards, despite cataloguing all the consummate negation they have had to face, RO B.M. Hairu still asserts

> All is well,
> At the limit of my eye is the sky,
> I shall stretch out my hope all the way;
> Along a path paved with lives,
> I will forge ahead. (61)

Perhaps such conviction can serve as the keynote of incantations of sanity for our torn times.

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Queer Silence and Public Morality: Identity Politics in Contemporary Ghana

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Abstract

In recent years, discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana have intensified, particularly within digital platforms and political discourse. While global movements advocate visibility and open expression, the Ghanaian context reveals a contrasting dynamic in which silence becomes a central mode of negotiating identity. This study introduces the concept of queer silence to examine how public morality, religious ideology, and cultural nationalism regulate LGBTQ+ identities. Drawing on data from online news articles, social media commentaries, TikTok videos, and protest imagery collected between 2023 and 2026, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how meanings of sexuality are constructed and contested.

The findings demonstrate that LGBTQ+ identities are frequently framed as foreign, immoral, and incompatible with national values. Digital platforms, rather than functioning solely as spaces of empowerment, operate as arenas of moral policing where dominant narratives are reinforced through collective participation. Silence, therefore, is not merely the absence of speech but a socially produced condition shaped by intersecting systems of power. It functions both

as a constraint imposed through moral surveillance and as a strategic response to social risk.

By situating queer silence within broader debates on discourse, power, and identity, this study contributes to scholarship on sexuality, digital media, and postcolonial social dynamics. It further underscores the need to rethink assumptions about visibility, agency, and resistance in contexts where expression is heavily regulated.

Keywords: *public morality, LGBTQ+ identity, digital media discourse, cultural nationalism, moral panic, Ghana*

Introduction

Queer identities are often rendered invisible not as a matter of personal choice but as a consequence of silence structured through social power, institutional norms, and moral regulation. Across diverse cultural contexts, dominant discourses on sexuality define what is considered legitimate by establishing boundaries of normalcy, morality, and belonging. These discourses typically privilege heterosexuality while marginalizing non-heteronormative identities, thereby rendering them unspeakable or socially unintelligible. Silence, in this regard, is not simply an absence of expression but a condition actively produced through systems of power that regulate visibility and identity formation.

Michel Foucault argues that discourse does not merely repress sexuality but actively produces it by organizing knowledge, categorizing identities, and attaching moral significance to them (*The History of Sexuality*). Through institutions such as the state, religion, law, media, and education, these discursive systems establish the parameters within which identities can be expressed and recognized. Consequently, certain identities are legitimized while others

are constructed as deviant, immoral, or threatening to social order. Individuals who fall outside dominant norms often navigate these conditions through self-regulation, carefully managing visibility to avoid stigma, exclusion, or violence.

In the Ghanaian context, public discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities has become increasingly polarized, particularly within political debates and digital media spaces. Narratives frequently position non-heteronormative identities as incompatible with cultural values, invoking themes of national sovereignty, religious morality, and social protection (Epprecht; Tamale). Sexuality thus becomes politicized, shifting from a private matter to a contested site of national identity and moral authority. These discourses often obscure the historical complexity of African sexualities, where diverse practices existed prior to colonial intervention, thereby reinforcing the misconception that homosexuality is a foreign imposition (Epprecht).

Contemporary debates are further shaped by colonial legacies embedded in legal and moral frameworks, which are often rearticulated as "traditional values" (Tamale). This produces a paradox in which queer identities are simultaneously erased from historical narratives and constructed as threats to cultural authenticity. At the same time, the expansion of digital media has transformed the nature of public discourse. Social media platforms function as accelerated spaces of communication where narratives are produced, circulated, and contested in real time. While these platforms create opportunities for visibility and alternative expression, they also amplify dominant ideologies through algorithmic visibility, public commentary, and viral dissemination (Papacharissi).

Within these digital environments, audiences increasingly participate in what can be understood as forms of moral surveillance. Users actively engage in reinforcing social norms through practices of judgment, ridicule, and exclusion. Consequently, digital spaces do not merely reflect existing societal attitudes but play an active role in shaping and intensifying them. It is within this context that this study introduces the concept of *queer silence*.

Queer silence refers to a socially produced condition in which visibility and expression are regulated through the intersection of religious morality, cultural nationalism, and digital discourse. Rather than signifying absence, silence operates as both a mechanism of control and a strategy of survival. It reflects the constraints imposed by external structures while also representing the adaptive responses of individuals navigating environments characterized by moral scrutiny and social risk.

This study addresses four central questions: How are LGBTQ+ identities constructed within Ghanaian public discourse? In what ways does public morality regulate behavior and identity? How do digital platforms reproduce and amplify these dynamics? And how does silence function simultaneously as a form of social control and a strategy of survival?

By situating queer silence within broader theoretical debates on discourse, power, and identity, this research contributes to emerging scholarship on sexuality, digital media, and postcolonial social formations. It offers critical insights into how visibility, belonging, and citizenship are negotiated in contemporary Ghana, where the decision to speak or remain silent is deeply shaped by intersecting structures of power.

Literature Review: Discourse, Morality, and the Regulation of Sexuality

The study of sexuality within the social sciences has long emphasized the role of discourse, power, and institutional regulation in shaping identity. One of the most influential contributions comes from Michel Foucault, who argues that sexuality is not merely repressed but actively produced through discursive systems that define, categorize, and regulate bodies and desires. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault asserts that modern societies generate knowledge about sexuality in ways that simultaneously enable and constrain expression, embedding moral judgments within institutional frameworks (Foucault). This perspective shifts the understanding of sexuality from a private, biological phenomenon to a socially constructed domain governed by power relations.

Building on this foundation, Judith Butler introduces the concept of performativity, arguing that gender and sexuality are not fixed identities but are continuously produced through repeated social practices. In Gender Trouble, Butler contends that heteronormative systems are maintained through performative acts that reinforce dominant expectations, thereby marginalizing identities that deviate from these norms (Butler). Similarly, Michael Warner conceptualizes heteronormativity as a pervasive cultural system that privileges heterosexuality while rendering alternative sexualities invisible or deviant (Warner). Within such frameworks, silence emerges not merely as absence but as a strategic and imposed condition, where individuals navigate visibility and concealment in response to social pressures.

In African contexts, debates on sexuality are deeply entangled with questions of culture, nationalism, and historical legitimacy. Marc Epprecht challenges the widely held belief that homosexuality is "un-African," demonstrating through historical evidence that diverse sexual practices existed across precolonial African societies (Epprecht). Sylvia Tamale further argues that contemporary homophobic attitudes are largely shaped by colonial legal systems and missionary moral frameworks, rather than indigenous cultural traditions (Tamale). These arguments complicate dominant narratives that position non-heteronormative identities as external impositions, revealing instead how colonial legacies continue to inform present-day moral discourses. Despite this scholarship, political and religious rhetoric in many African societies continues to frame LGBTQ+ identities as threats to cultural authenticity and social cohesion (Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid).

The role of media in shaping public perceptions of sexuality has also received considerable scholarly attention. Framing theory provides a useful lens for understanding how media representations construct meaning by selecting certain aspects of reality while excluding others. Robert Entman explains that frames define problems, assign causality, and suggest moral evaluations, thereby influencing how audiences interpret social issues (Entman). In the context of sexuality, media framing often emphasizes themes of morality, deviance, and threat, contributing to the stigmatization of marginalized identities. Complementing this perspective, Stanley Cohen's theory of moral panic illustrates how societies periodically construct "folk devils" who are portrayed as dangers to social order, leading to heightened fear, hostility, and calls for regulation (Cohen). These processes are particularly relevant in discussions of LGBTQ+ identities, where exaggerated

narratives of threat are frequently mobilized to justify exclusionary practices.

With the rise of digital technologies, the dynamics of discourse production and dissemination have undergone significant transformation. Zizi Papacharissi highlights how online platforms function as hybrid spaces that enable both democratic participation and the reinforcement of dominant ideologies (Papacharissi). While digital media offers opportunities for visibility and alternative narratives, it also amplifies existing power structures through algorithms, virality, and user interactions. In such environments, public discourse is shaped not only by institutional actors but also by everyday users who participate in the construction and policing of social norms. This participatory dimension complicates traditional understandings of media influence, revealing how audiences actively engage in reinforcing or contesting dominant narratives.

To fully understand the complexity of marginalization, intersectionality provides an essential analytical framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emphasizes how multiple forms of oppression—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—interact to produce unique experiences of disadvantage (Crenshaw). In the context of LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana, sexuality intersects with religion, cultural identity, and nationalism, creating layered forms of exclusion that cannot be understood in isolation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of the "closet" further illuminates how knowledge and ignorance about sexuality are socially organized, structuring the conditions under which individuals disclose or conceal their identities (Sedgwick). Together, these perspectives highlight how silence operates within broader systems of power, functioning as both a constraint and a mode of negotiation.

Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into discourse, power, and sexuality, there remains a gap in understanding how silence itself functions as a socially produced condition within contemporary African contexts. Much of the literature focuses on visibility, resistance, and rights-based activism, often overlooking the ways in which individuals navigate environments where visibility carries significant risks. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of "queer silence" as an analytical framework for examining how public morality, digital media, and institutional power shape the conditions of expression and concealment. By situating silence within broader discursive and intersectional processes, the research contributes to ongoing debates on sexuality, identity, and postcolonial social dynamics.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore how queer silence appears in Ghana's digital public discussions. The research focuses on understanding how language, power, and social norms shape the way LGBTQ+ identities are talked about. To achieve this, the study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on the work of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk. CDA is useful because it helps examine how language reflects power relations and social inequalities, especially in sensitive topics like sexuality.

Critical Discourse Analysis is appropriate for this study because it does not treat language as neutral. Instead, it looks at how words, phrases, and narratives are used to support certain beliefs while excluding others. In the Ghanaian context, CDA helps explain how discussions about LGBTQ+ identities are shaped by ideas of morality, religion,

and culture. It also shows how these ideas are repeated and strengthened in everyday communication, especially on digital platforms.

The data for this study were collected from three main sources: online news articles, social media comments, and TikTok videos. In addition, visual materials such as protest images and public demonstrations were included to support the analysis. The researcher selected content that focused on LGBTQ+ issues, morality, or national identity. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure that only relevant data were included. In total, the dataset consisted of about 50 news articles, 400–500 social media comments, 25 TikTok videos, and 20 visual materials.

The sampling process continued until no new ideas or patterns were found in the data. This point is known as saturation, where additional data no longer adds new insights. Using different sources helped strengthen the study because it allowed comparison across platforms. News articles reflected institutional viewpoints, while social media comments and TikTok videos showed how ordinary people respond to and reproduce these ideas.

The analysis was carried out in three main stages. First, the researcher carefully read and reviewed all the data to become familiar with it. During this stage, common words and phrases such as "immoral," "unnatural," "foreign," and "against our culture" were identified. Second, these repeated expressions were grouped into themes. The main themes included cultural nationalism, religious moral authority, protectionist discourse, digital moral policing, moral panic, and strategic silence. These themes helped organize the data and show patterns across different sources.

In the final stage, the themes were interpreted within the broader social context of Ghana. This involved linking the findings to ideas about religion, nationalism, and public morality. For example, statements about "protecting children" were understood as part of a wider moral narrative that presents LGBTQ+ identities as a threat to society. Similarly, the absence of openly LGBTQ+ voices was interpreted as strategic silence, showing how people avoid visibility due to fear of backlash or social risk.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. All the data used were publicly available, and no private information was accessed. The identities of users were kept anonymous, and any personal details were removed. The study followed ethical guidelines for internet research, ensuring that the data were used responsibly and respectfully.

However, the study has some limitations. Since it relies on publicly available digital data, it may not fully capture private experiences or offline realities. Some individuals may choose silence both online and offline, which cannot be observed in this dataset. Also, while Critical Discourse Analysis is effective for studying language and power, it does not directly capture personal experiences. Future research could include interviews or ethnographic methods to better understand how individuals experience and manage silence in their daily lives.

Overall, this methodology provides a clear and effective way to understand how queer silence is produced and maintained in Ghana's digital public space. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis with multiple data sources, the study shows how language, power, and social norms work together to shape identity, visibility, and silence.

Findings

Cultural Nationalism and the Construction of "Foreignness"

A dominant and recurring theme across the dataset is the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as fundamentally "foreign" and incompatible with national culture. This framing operates as a central discursive strategy through which non-heteronormative identities are positioned outside the boundaries of legitimate belonging in Ghana. Rather than engaging sexuality as a dimension of individual identity, public discourse consistently rearticulates it as a question of national integrity and cultural preservation.

This narrative is particularly evident in media representations and political rhetoric, where LGBTQ+ identities are frequently associated with external influence, often framed as a "Western agenda." Such constructions rely on a binary opposition between an "authentic" Ghanaian identity and a perceived foreign intrusion. Statements such as "this is not our culture" or "these practices are imported from the West" exemplify how sexuality is discursively linked to questions of origin, thereby delegitimizing non-heteronormative identities through their alleged lack of cultural authenticity.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern reflects the intersection of discourse and nationalism, where identity is regulated through narratives of belonging and exclusion. As Stuart Hall argues, cultural identity is not fixed but constructed through representation. In this context, the repeated association of queerness with foreignness produces a symbolic boundary that separates the "national self" from the "deviant other." This process is further reinforced through what Robert Entman conceptualizes as framing, whereby selective emphasis on certain interpretations shapes public

perception and narrows the range of acceptable meanings. Importantly, this discourse obscures historical evidence of sexual diversity within African societies, as highlighted by Marc Epprecht. By erasing these histories, the narrative of foreignness functions as a tool of exclusion that legitimizes contemporary forms of marginalization while presenting them as acts of cultural defence. In doing so, it transforms sexuality into a site of ideological struggle where national identity is both asserted and policed.

The persistence and frequency of this theme within the dataset indicate that cultural nationalism serves as a foundational mechanism in the production of queer silence. By positioning LGBTQ+ identities as inherently external and illegitimate, this discourse not only restricts visibility but also renders self-identification socially risky. Silence, in this context, emerges as a response to a discursive environment in which recognition is contingent upon conformity to narrowly defined notions of cultural authenticity.

Religious Moral Authority and the Spiritual Regulation of Sexuality

Religious discourse emerges as a central and highly influential mechanism in the regulation of LGBTQ+ identities within Ghanaian public discourse. Across the dataset, references to religion—particularly Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam—are consistently mobilized to frame non-heteronormative identities as morally deviant, spiritually dangerous, and fundamentally incompatible with divine order. In this context, sexuality is not merely constructed as a social or cultural issue but is elevated to a matter of spiritual legitimacy, where acceptance or rejection is justified through appeals to sacred authority.

A recurring pattern within media narratives and user-generated content is the use of explicitly moralizing language, including terms such as "sin," "abomination," "evil," and "against God's will." These linguistic choices function not only as descriptors but as powerful discursive tools that assign moral value and reinforce hierarchical distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable identities. By grounding such judgments in religious doctrine, these discourses acquire an aura of unquestionable authority, making them particularly resistant to critique or contestation

From a theoretical standpoint, this dynamic aligns with Michel Foucault's conception of power as productive and diffuse, operating through institutions and forms of knowledge that shape subjectivity. Religion, in this sense, functions as a key site of discursive power, producing norms that regulate both behaviour and self-perception. Individuals are not only subjected to external judgment but may also internalize these moral frameworks, leading to self-regulation and the suppression of non-conforming identities.

Protectionist Narratives and the Politics of Fear

Another prominent theme within the dataset is the deployment of protectionist narratives that frame LGBTQ+ identities as threats to children, family structures, and the moral future of society. Unlike explicitly religious condemnations, these discourses operate through affective appeals, mobilizing fear, anxiety, and a sense of urgency to justify exclusionary attitudes and practices. In this context, the regulation of sexuality is articulated not only as a moral or cultural imperative but as a protective necessity.

Across media texts and user-generated content, LGBTQ+ identities are frequently associated with the corruption of youth, the breakdown of traditional family

systems, and the erosion of social values. Phrases such as "protect our children," "save the next generation," and "defend the family" recur with notable consistency, constructing a narrative in which queerness is positioned as an external threat targeting vulnerable populations. These representations are rarely supported by empirical evidence; rather, they function symbolically to generate moral concern and legitimize restrictive positions.

This pattern closely aligns with the concept of moral panic as theorized by Stanley Cohen. In such scenarios, specific groups are constructed as "folk devils" who are perceived to endanger societal norms and values. LGBTQ+ individuals, within this framework, become symbolic figures onto which broader anxieties about social change, globalization, and cultural transformation are projected. The intensity of these reactions often exceeds the actual "threat," highlighting the role of discourse in amplifying fear and shaping collective perception. The role of media in sustaining these narratives can be further understood through Robert Entman's theory of framing. By selectively emphasizing themes of danger, vulnerability, and protection, media and digital content creators contribute to a discursive environment in which LGBTQ+ identities are consistently linked to risk. This framing not only influences how audiences interpret information but also narrows the scope of acceptable responses, making exclusion appear both rational and necessary.

Importantly, protectionist narratives are deeply intertwined with constructions of idealized family structures, which are typically defined in heteronormative terms. The family is positioned as a foundational social unit that must be preserved, and any deviation from normative gender and sexual roles is framed as a destabilizing force. In this way, the regulation of sexuality becomes inseparable from broader efforts to maintain social order and continuity.

The implications of this discourse for queer individuals are significant. By associating visibility with harm—particularly harm to children and future generations—these narratives intensify the risks associated with self-expression. Silence, in this context, emerges as both a protective response and a consequence of a discursive environment saturated with fear. The politics of protection thus operates as a powerful mechanism through which queer silence is produced, sustained, and normalized within the broader framework of public morality.

This process can be further understood through the lens of performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler. Within a religiously structured moral order, acceptable identities are those that align with prescribed norms of gender and sexuality. Silence, therefore, becomes a form of constrained performativity—an act shaped by the anticipation of social and spiritual consequences. The refusal or inability to openly express queer identity is not simply a lack of voice but a response to a system in which deviation is framed as both socially and divinely punishable.

Moreover, the invocation of religious authority often intersects with broader narratives of national identity, reinforcing the idea that moral purity is essential to cultural integrity. In this way, religion does not operate in isolation but in conjunction with nationalism, producing a powerful ideological framework that legitimizes exclusion while presenting it as a defence of collective values. The prominence of religious discourse within the dataset underscores its role in sustaining environments of constraint and risk. By framing LGBTQ+ identities as morally and spiritually illegitimate, these narratives contribute directly to the production of queer silence. Silence, in this context, is not merely imposed but becomes a necessary strategy for navigating a social

landscape in which visibility carries significant moral and existential consequences.

Digital Moral Policing and Participatory Surveillance

The analysis reveals that digital platforms function not merely as spaces of expression but as active sites of moral regulation, where users participate directly in the policing of sexuality. Across social media comments, TikTok interactions, and online discussions, individuals engage in practices of judgment, correction, ridicule, and condemnation, effectively transforming digital environments into arenas of participatory surveillance. In these spaces, the regulation of LGBTQ+ identities is no longer confined to formal institutions but is enacted through decentralized, everyday interactions. A defining feature of this dynamic is the visibility of moral enforcement at the level of ordinary users. Comments frequently include directives such as "this is wrong," "stop promoting this," or "this should not be allowed," indicating an active investment in maintaining normative boundaries. These interventions are often immediate and collective, creating an environment in which dissenting expressions are rapidly challenged and suppressed. The cumulative effect is the normalization of heteronormative standards through repeated acts of public correction and social sanctioning.

This phenomenon can be understood through Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, particularly the idea that surveillance operates most effectively when it is internalized and diffused across society. In digital contexts, this form of power becomes participatory: individuals simultaneously act as observers and enforcers, monitoring

the behavior of others while also regulating their own self-presentation. The result is a self-reinforcing system in which conformity is maintained not only through institutional authority but through peer-driven oversight. The architecture of digital platforms further intensifies these dynamics. As Zizi Papacharissi notes, algorithmic systems prioritize engagement, often amplifying content that provokes strong emotional reactions. In the context of LGBTQ+ discourse, this frequently results in the increased visibility of polarizing or hostile content, thereby reinforcing dominant narratives and marginalizing alternative perspectives. The interactive nature of these platforms ensures that users are not passive consumers but active participants in the production and circulation of meaning.

Moreover, the public and permanent nature of online interactions heightens the risks associated with visibility. Expressions of queer identity are subject to immediate scrutiny and can be widely disseminated, exposing individuals to potential backlash, harassment, or social exclusion. This environment fosters a heightened awareness of surveillance, where the possibility of being judged or targeted influences how individuals choose to present themselves—or whether they choose to speak at all.

Within this context, queer silence emerges as a rational and strategic response to the conditions of digital visibility. The decision to remain silent, anonymous, or indirect is shaped by an acute awareness of the consequences of exposure within highly monitored and morally charged environments. Thus, digital platforms simultaneously enable visibility and

constrain it, producing a paradox in which the potential for expression is accompanied by intensified mechanisms of control. The findings suggest that participatory surveillance is a key mechanism through which public morality is enacted in contemporary digital spaces. By distributing the responsibility of regulation across users, these platforms embed moral policing within everyday interaction, thereby sustaining the conditions under which queer silence is both produced and normalized.

Moral Panic and the Construction of Social Threat

A broader pattern that emerges across the dataset is the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as a generalized social threat, extending beyond concerns of morality or cultural authenticity to encompass anxieties about national stability, social order, and collective futures. This framing reflects a classic process of moral panic, in which particular groups are symbolically positioned as dangers to the fabric of society, thereby justifying heightened levels of scrutiny, regulation, and exclusion. The concept of moral panic, as developed by Stanley Cohen, provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. Moral panics typically involve the identification of "folk devils," exaggerated representations of threat, and the mobilization of public concern that exceeds the scale of the perceived problem. Within the Ghanaian context, LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently cast in this role, depicted as agents of moral decay, cultural disruption, and social instability. These representations are not isolated but are reinforced across multiple discursive sites, including media coverage, political rhetoric, and digital interactions.

A key feature of this process is the amplification of threat through repetition and circulation. Narratives

suggesting that LGBTQ+ identities will "destroy society," "undermine the nation," or "lead to moral collapse" recur across platforms, often without substantive evidence. Such claims function less as factual statements and more as affective signals that evoke fear and urgency. Through this repetition, the perception of threat becomes normalized, shaping public consciousness and narrowing the space for alternative interpretations.

The role of media in sustaining moral panic is particularly significant. Drawing on Robert Entman's theory of framing, it becomes evident that selective emphasis on crisis, danger, and deviance contributes to the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as inherently problematic. By foregrounding conflict and moral controversy, media narratives amplify the visibility of perceived threats while marginalizing more nuanced or supportive perspectives. This selective representation reinforces a binary framework in which queerness is consistently aligned with disruption and instability.

Furthermore, moral panic operates in conjunction with broader political and cultural anxieties. In contexts marked by rapid social change and global interconnectedness, sexuality becomes a symbolic terrain upon which fears of external influence, moral decline, and loss of sovereignty are projected. LGBTQ+ identities, in this sense, function as a focal point through which these anxieties are articulated and managed. The intensity of the response is therefore less about sexuality itself and more about what it comes to represent within a shifting socio-political landscape.

The implications of this discursive construction are profound. By framing LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to society, moral panic legitimizes exclusionary attitudes and

practices, making them appear necessary for the protection of the collective good. This environment not only discourages open expression but actively produces conditions in which silence becomes a rational and often unavoidable response. Queer silence, in this context, is shaped by the pervasive sense that visibility invites not only judgment but also association with broader narratives of danger and deviance. Ultimately, the construction of social threat through moral panic reinforces the regulatory power of public discourse, embedding exclusion within the language of protection and collective survival. This dynamic underscores' the extent to which silence is not simply imposed but is produced through the normalization of fear as a governing logic within contemporary debates on sexuality.

Strategic Silence and Constrained Visibility

The most significant finding emerging from this study is not only what is said about LGBTQ+ identities, but what remains unsaid. Across the dataset, there is a striking absence of openly self-identifying queer voices, particularly in contrast to the overwhelming presence of moralizing, regulatory, and often hostile discourse. This absence, however, should not be interpreted as non-existence or lack of agency. Rather, it reflects the operation of what this study conceptualizes as **queer silence**—a socially produced condition shaped by risk, surveillance, and the constraints of public morality.

Within the discursive environment examined, visibility is not a neutral or inherently empowering act. Instead, it is structured by the anticipation of negative consequences, including social exclusion, moral condemnation, and potential harm. As such, the decision to remain silent, anonymous, or indirect emerges as a rational and strategic response to a context in which expression is heavily regulated. Silence,

in this sense, is not merely imposed but actively negotiated, reflecting a complex interplay between constraint and agency.

This dynamic can be understood through the framework of performativity advanced by Judith Butler, where identity is constituted through repeated acts within a field of normative expectations. In contexts where deviation from these norms carries significant penalties, silence becomes a form of constrained performance—an act that both reflects and reproduces the limits of what can be expressed. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of the "closet" highlights how knowledge and disclosure are structured by power, producing a constant negotiation between visibility and concealment. The digital dimension further intensifies this condition. While online platforms theoretically expand opportunities for self-expression, they simultaneously expose individuals to heightened forms of surveillance and public scrutiny. The permanence and reach of digital content mean that expressions of identity can be widely circulated and subjected to collective judgment, increasing the potential risks associated with visibility. In such environments, silence functions as a protective mechanism, allowing individuals to navigate participation without direct exposure.

At the same time, silence should not be understood solely as a marker of oppression. In certain instances, it may also operate as a subtle form of resistance, enabling individuals to withhold participation from dominant discursive frameworks that seek to define and constrain them. This dual character complicates conventional binaries between voice and silence, suggesting that absence itself can carry meaning and strategic intent. By foregrounding queer silence as both a product of structural constraint and a mode of strategic navigation, this study challenges dominant assumptions within global LGBTQ+ discourse that equate visibility with empowerment.

Instead, it highlights the importance of context in shaping the possibilities and limits of expression. In environments where visibility entails significant risk, silence may represent not a failure of agency but a calculated response to conditions of vulnerability.

Ultimately, queer silence emerges as a central mechanism through which identity is negotiated within Ghana's contemporary socio-digital landscape. It reflects the cumulative effects of cultural nationalism, religious moral authority, protectionist discourse, and participatory surveillance, demonstrating how power operates not only through what is spoken but also through what remains unsaid.

Discussion: Rethinking Visibility, Power, and Resistance

The findings of this study reveal that public discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana is structured through a complex interplay of cultural nationalism, religious morality, affective politics, and digitally mediated surveillance. Together, these forces produce an environment in which non-heteronormative identities are systematically positioned outside the boundaries of legitimate social belonging. By examining these dynamics through the lens of discourse and power, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how sexuality is regulated in contemporary postcolonial contexts. Central to this analysis is the insight that public morality functions as a key mechanism of governance. Drawing on Michel Foucault, the findings demonstrate that power operates not merely through prohibition but through the production of norms that shape what can be said, who can speak, and how identities are recognized. The recurring construction of LGBTQ+ identities as foreign, immoral, and threatening illustrates how discourse produces categories of

exclusion while simultaneously legitimizing their regulation. In this sense, morality is not simply a set of beliefs but a regulatory framework that organizes social life and enforces conformity.

The study also extends Judith Butler's theory of performativity by illustrating how silence functions as a constrained mode of identity performance. In contexts where visibility entails significant social and moral risk, the refusal or inability to speak openly becomes a meaningful act shaped by the anticipation of consequences. This challenges dominant interpretations of performativity that prioritize visible acts, suggesting instead that absence and concealment are equally important in understanding how identities are constituted under conditions of constraint. Furthermore, the findings complicate prevailing assumptions within global LGBTQ+ discourse that equate visibility with empowerment. Much of the existing literature, particularly in Western contexts, emphasizes coming out and public recognition as central to identity affirmation and political progress. However, this study demonstrates that such frameworks are not universally applicable. In environments characterized by moral regulation and social risk, visibility may intensify vulnerability rather than alleviate it. Silence, therefore, must be understood not as a failure of agency but as a contextually situated response to structures of power.

The role of digital media further deepens this analysis. While online platforms are often celebrated for their democratizing potential, the findings reveal that they also function as spaces of intensified regulation. Through processes of participatory surveillance, users actively engage in the enforcement of moral norms, transforming digital environments into sites of collective discipline. This observation aligns with and extends the work of Zizi

Papacharissi by demonstrating how networked publics can simultaneously enable expression and constrain it through normative pressure and algorithmic amplification. Importantly, the convergence of nationalism and morality highlights the broader political dimensions of sexuality. By framing LGBTQ+ identities as threats to cultural authenticity and national integrity, public discourse mobilizes sexuality as a symbolic terrain upon which anxieties about globalization, sovereignty, and social change are negotiated. This reinforces the argument that sexuality cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within wider socio-political processes that shape its meaning and regulation.

Taken together, these insights underscore the need to rethink dominant binaries between visibility and invisibility, voice and silence, oppression and resistance. The concept of queer silence advanced in this study offers a framework for understanding how these binaries are destabilized in practice. Silence emerges not simply as the absence of expression but as a condition produced through power relations and, at times, strategically navigated by individuals seeking to mitigate risk. By foregrounding the productive dimensions of silence, this study contributes to ongoing debates in queer theory, postcolonial studies, and digital media scholarship. It calls for greater attention to the ways in which context shapes the possibilities of identity expression and challenges universalizing assumptions about the relationship between visibility and empowerment. In doing so, it opens new avenues for understanding how marginalized identities are negotiated within environments where expression is both enabled and constrained by the same structures of power

Conclusion

This study has examined how LGBTQ+ identities are discursively constructed and regulated within the contemporary socio-digital landscape of Ghana, with particular attention to the production and function of queer silence. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of media texts, social media interactions, and visual materials, the research has demonstrated that sexuality is not merely debated but actively governed through intersecting frameworks of cultural nationalism, religious morality, affective politics, and participatory surveillance. The findings reveal that LGBTQ+ identities are consistently positioned as foreign, immoral, and socially threatening, thereby legitimizing their exclusion from the boundaries of acceptable national belonging. These constructions are not isolated but are reinforced across multiple discursive sites, producing an environment in which visibility is structured by risk. Within such conditions, silence emerges as a central mechanism through which identity is negotiated.

By conceptualizing queer silence as both a product of structural constraint and a strategy of navigation, this study challenges dominant assumptions that equate visibility with empowerment. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the paper has shown that silence is not simply the absence of voice but a condition produced through power relations that shape what can be expressed, recognized, and legitimized. At the same time, silence may function as a calculated response to environments characterized by moral regulation and social vulnerability. The study contributes to ongoing debates in queer theory and postcolonial scholarship by foregrounding the contextual nature of identity expression. It underscores the need to move beyond universalizing frameworks that privilege visibility as

a singular marker of progress, instead recognizing the diverse strategies through which individuals negotiate belonging and safety. In digitally mediated contexts, where expression is simultaneously enabled and constrained, these dynamics become even more pronounced.

While this research has focused on Ghana, its implications extend to other settings where sexuality is embedded within contested moral and political frameworks. Future research may build on this work by exploring how queer silence operates across different cultural contexts, or by examining the ways in which alternative forms of expression such as coded communication or anonymous participation challenge dominant discursive regimes. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of attending not only to what is spoken but also to what remains unsaid. In doing so, it positions silence as a critical site of analysis, offering new insights into the relationship between discourse, power, and identity in contemporary societies.

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