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MANGALA GAURI CHAKRABORTY
December 2021

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Introduction

This volume was planned about one year into the pandemic—the Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (CoVid 19)—when it became obvious that the lockdowns and the practice of working from home were having the greatest brunt on women. Homemakers or career women: upon them fell the onus of running the house, caring for the family and in some cases being subject to violence by members of their own families. This volume highlights the voices of women, specifically of the Twentieth Century. Originally conceived as being based only on autobiography and memoir, it has been expanded to include fiction as well, considering such creative work also as distinctively expressive of the voice of women.

The papers in this volume begin with the experiences of women in India, and move through Bangladesh, Japan, Botswana and the United States of America. The final paper brings in the experiences of immigrants from Mexico, Rwanda, Vietnam and Iran. Some of the papers explore disturbing aspects of the violence women have to face within the home as in Rohit Prasad's paper on Dressler, and in the public sphere as in the works of Mahasweta Devi as examined by Ananya Ghosh.

A variety of genres has been addressed in this volume. We begin with travelogues recording the cultural exposure experienced by Indian women travelling in England in Sarbajaya Bhattacharya's paper and the memoirs of two outspoken Indian writers in the paper contributed by our current final year students Ananya Sarkar and Debapriya Sarkar. Julie Banerjee Mehta takes up Gita Mehta's treatment of myths in her book *A River Sutra*. Short stories by writers from two continents are examined by Ananya Ghosh. The focus of the paper by Jasmine A. Chowdhury is Tahmina Anam's narrative set in the time of the birth of Bangladesh and the way in which

life histories of women are intertwined in the history of a nation. Atisha Rai's paper explores how the condition of the atomic bomb survivors of Japan, particularly the women, tends to get reframed to diminish the horror of their experience. Graphic novels are taken up by two contributors: Rohit Prasad suggests that this is, perhaps, the best medium to take up and validate the experience of survivors of domestic violence; also, the Vietnamese Thi Bui, one of the four immigrants in Udita Chakraborty's paper, presents her experiences in the form of a graphic memoir.

The diversity of places, cultures and genres only tends to highlight the essential similarity of the situations and experiences of women living in patriarchal societies. It is in their creative writing that their voices can be heard.

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The Resident Outsider: The Journal and Letters of Nalini Das

Sarbajaya Bhattacharya

Across various cultures of the world, with the development of technology in the mode of transportation, the culture of travel also changed and developed. Out of these transformations emerged various new categories of travellers as well—the tourist, for instance, being one of them. In India, the emergence of this category is linked primarily with the advent of the railways and the proliferation of travel as a result of it.

Each category of travellers—a pilgrim, a merchant, a tourist—is created, conditioned, and developed at the intersections of class, caste, gender, religion, nationality, and language to name only a few elements. While we may choose to focus on any one at a time, these categories are certainly not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are overlapping lines, creating new intersections and new perspectives through which to view the broader category of the traveller.

This article intends to investigate one such category which it will call the 'resident outsider'—a temporary inhabitant of a foreign land—occupying a twilight zone between the inside and out. To illustrate this category, this article has chosen the journal and letters of Nalini Das.[1] Das's journal contains an account of her voyage to England. The letters, written to her husband back home in Calcutta, narrate her experiences in England and various other parts of Europe to which she travelled and/or stayed.

This paper intends to situate Nalini Das within the larger framework of Hindu/Brahmo women's travel and travel writing in late nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal while keeping in mind the peculiar socio-political conditions that shaped their journeys and simultaneous or subsequent literary outputs regarding the same. The

primary focus of this article is to trace the development of the way in which women inscribe themselves into a wider world through their travels and travel writing.

BACKGROUND: NINETEENTH CENTURY

The history of voyages undertaken by Bengali *bhadramahilas* is now well-documented.[2] It begins with Rajkumari Banerji in 1871 who sailed to England with her husband and remained there for a number of years, even giving birth to her son Albion there.[3] Their families were not supportive of their journey abroad, reflecting the contemporary Hindu orthodox mindset that equated crossing the *kalapani* (literally 'black waters', referring to the sea) to a sort of fall from grace—in this case, the honour of their caste.[4]

About a decade after Rajkumari, Krishnabhabini Das and her husband faced similar ostracisation for travelling to England. While Rajkumari became a mother on British soil, Krishnabhabini was leaving behind a six year old daughter, who would be married off by the time she returned from her foreign sojourn eight years later. In fact, not only would Krishnabhabini bear the brunt of social ostracism, her daughter, feeling a sense of abandonment, would refuse to see her before she died an untimely death.[5]

For Rajkumari, who left no memoir or travelogue, and Krishnabhabini, who published her travelogue anonymously while she was still in England, motherhood seems to be inextricably linked to their journeys.

Most of the women who travelled to England in the nineteenth century were accompanied by their husbands. This probably would have been a rare—and possibly for many of these women, the first—instance of travelling such a long distance with their husbands alone. In the culture of travel, even in the second half of the nineteenth century, travelling for enjoyment would mean travelling with the entire family—a trend that would continue for years to come and

almost become synonymous with the image of the Bengali tourist.

Among those who did travel alone was Jnanadanandini Devi. In 1879 she boarded a ship to England with her children, while she was heavily pregnant, to visit her husband Satyendranath Tagore. Others who travelled to Europe in the nineteenth century include Swarnalata Ghosh, Hemangini Devi, Abala Basu, Kadambini Ganguly, Jamini Sen among others.[6]

The reasons for their journeys are quite varied. Rajkumari and Sasipada were invited to visit England by Mary Carpenter.[7] Krishnabhabini's husband Debendranath Das had gone to England for higher education and to appear for the ICS examination. His wife had stayed at home in India. Debendranath returned to India, but soon afterwards decided to move back to England, this time, with his wife.[8] Krishnabhabini, who was literate and educated herself, took an active interest in women's education and the position of women in British society. Through her book, she was "determined to enlighten her Bengali sisters", although in publishing her book anonymously, it appears that she is still apprehensive regarding her authority to do so.[9]

Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen had gone to England for higher education. Kadambini Ganguly had enrolled at the Edinburgh Medical College in Scotland in 1893. Jamini Sen also went to study medicine, and together they constitute the very small and certainly elite group of young women who had, through far greater effort and overcoming far more obstacles than their male counterparts, won the opportunity to travel abroad to pursue higher education.[10] When, in the 1940s, Nalini Das makes her way to England with a group of other women on a fellowship provided by the Government, the situation seems to have improved.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief survey is that from available accounts, it appears that Europe in general or England in particular had not yet emerged as a tourist destination, even for the more affluent sections of Bengali society. The most common

occurrence was for the men to go abroad to either sit for the Civil Service Examination or to study Law and they took their wives along with them. Kadambini and Jamini are certainly exceptions that only prove the rule at this stage.

Interestingly enough, even while public debates raged in Bengal regarding the voyage across the dreaded *kalapani*, women remained largely absent from that discourse even as subjects, let alone as commentators.[11] The primary fear surrounding the sea voyage was the free inter-mingling of various castes aboard the vessel—a space where such hierarchical categories would temporarily have to be suspended. Hindu women were ascribed a caste at birth based on the caste of their father. A woman's body would often have to bear the burden of preserving caste honour. However, she was not a true Brahmin. It was a privilege that could only be accorded to those who had attained *dwijatva*—reserved exclusively for men, the only bearers of the sacred thread. A woman's caste depended upon the men who were endowed with her responsibility—the father and then the husband. Thus, it is not so much the question of invisibility of women travellers, although that is a factor, but also the invisibility of women within the very structures of Brahminical patriarchy that removed them from this public discourse on travel.

And yet they travelled.

Abala Basu, for instance, was a prolific traveller. With her husband, the scientist Jagadish Chandra Basu, she had not only travelled extensively within India, but had also been abroad on numerous occasions including England, Italy, America, and Japan. Her first voyage to England was with her husband in 1896. She published an account of her travels in a series of short articles in the Bengali juvenile periodical *Mukul*.[12]

NALINI DAS

Nalini Das was born in 1916 to Punyalata and Arun Nath

Chakrabarti. Her mother was the daughter of Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri. She was educated at Brahmo Balika Bidyalay and St. John's Diocesan School in Calcutta and later went on to study at Scottish Church College for her Bachelor's Degree and at the University of Calcutta for her Master's. She was the first in her class in both her undergraduate and postgraduate examinations. Nalini Das then embarked on a career of teaching which eventually led to her trip to England in 1945. The Bengal government wanted to establish a Teachers' Training College. With this aim in mind, they provided scholarships to some women to receive training in England. Nalini Das was a part of that group. The journal to be discussed in this article describes this voyage to England. As a part of their training programme, the author and her fellow students visited other countries in Europe as well including France and Switzerland. From these places, and from England while she lived there, the author wrote letters to her husband—Ashokananda Das—who was the younger brother of the renowned Bengali poet Jibanananda Das. These letters were first published posthumously in *Sandesh*—the Bengali juvenile periodical established by Upendrakishore, almost fifty years after they were written, between 1993 and 1997. It is curious that letters addressed to her husband found their place in a periodical for children, albeit in an edited form.[13]

Despite its popularity ever since it began to be published, the path of this periodical was not without its ups and downs. Upendrakishore passed away soon after *Sandesh* began publication in 1913 and the editorial mantle was taken up by his son Sukumar Ray. The periodical continued to be published without interruption till 1925. After a four year hiatus, it was revived in 1929, only to be discontinued again in 1934.

It was after almost thirty years that the periodical was revived under Satyajit Ray in 1961. From the 1960s, Nalini Das was involved with the periodical as an editor—an association that was to continue until her death in 1993.[14]

Nalini Das herself, of course, was a prolific children's author, following in the footsteps of her maternal family. She is most remembered as the creator of 'Goyenda Gondalu'—an all girls' group of young detectives. Many of her short stories were published in *Sandesh*.

The travelogue as a literary genre is interesting for the sense of immediacy it often seeks to invoke. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the culture of travelling for leisure was still at a nascent stage, the travelogue could provide for its readers a sense of 'being there' without moving. As works intending to record India's glorious past, the sense of being present was an act of witnessing history, thus claiming historical accuracy based on direct observation or experience.[15] In other words, it sought to provide the readers with an experience they could not have, and therefore, was filled in 'thick description' with details about the journey as well as the landscape. This was especially true of journeys abroad, for even if the reader, young or old, had an opportunity to travel to other parts of India, especially with the advent of the railways, a trip to Europe in general or England in particular would be unaffordable for most. There is also a sense often in these travelogues of the experience being unique even in the life of the traveller (with certain privileged exceptions such as Abala Basu perhaps). Therefore, it may be argued, that recording the minutiae of the journey and subsequent travels was as much a record for them as it was for the absent readers. The journal and letters of Nalini Das display both tendencies of documentation. That she could take photographs would have added another dimension to the reader(s) of her letters.[16]

THE JOURNEY

Nalini Das's journal traces her journey from Bombay to Liverpool in 1945—a voyage of twenty days.

Travel accounts from the late nineteenth century and beyond began typically with a description of the voyage across the sea. And this began with a description of the ship. Once the prohibition on Hindu sea voyages was finally abolished in 1894, "the ship indeed became the harbinger of a new age and vehicle for transition from 'medievalism' to 'modernity'."[17]

In 1945, the ship Nalini Das had boarded would have followed the well-known route to England from Bombay—passing Ceylon, Aden, the Red Sea, crossing the Suez Canal, and reaching Europe. Like her predecessors, Nalini Das describes her first sight of the ship and the general hustle and bustle that surrounds the port.

> We had no idea that travelling on a ship was such a great matter! A few thousand people have gathered below a shed with their luggage. It is as hot as it is crowded. And equally chaotic. No one tells you what to do step by step. One has to stand in one queue after another! Once they say, medical examin [sic], or they ask for the passport, or they ask for the cabin number. Thomas Cook almost stopped me from going abroad. They had misplaced two of my big suitcases and one of Ranu's![18]

An initial sense of chaos gives way to a sense of discipline aboard the ship—a quality associated with the British race venerated by those who had sailed before her. Das writes almost grudgingly of their efficiency, "Their organization must be praised. We can barely feel the presence of so many persons. Everything functions like clockwork."[19]

WOMEN AND THE WORLD

As has been previously mentioned, the author was travelling to England to receive teacher's training with a group of women

who had all received the same scholarship. While it is not clear exactly how many women were a part of this group, she refers on numerous occasions to one Bachchu *di* (Amita Dutta), Layla (Khan), Rabeya, and Ranu. These women were her companions during her travels in England and the Continent as well. In this context, Nalini Das's travelogue stands apart from the accounts of her predecessors, even those who travelled, as she did, for the purpose of educational training. The world of associations Nalini Das introduced her readers to, is a world populated by women. This has important implications in understanding the culture of travel at this time, the position of women within it and their experience of travelling.

The very fact of the presence of so many women within this world that Das creates is indicative of a changing culture of travel in the twentieth century which sees more women in it. This is certainly not to suggest, and throughout this article the contrary has been argued, that women did not travel before. Women from Bengal were travelling around India and to foreign lands even though their journeys often remained uncharted and undocumented. However, the numbers would certainly have increased in the twentieth century, especially of women travelling alone.

Aboard the ship, for instance, Das meets Devaki Pannikar and Santosh Kashyap. In Das's words:

> On the bunk below me is Devaki Pannikar—a South Indian girl, typical Indian style, her face is quite sweet. She is on her way to Oxford to study Philosophy, Economics, and Politics. Santosh Kashyap—Kashmiri, tall, slim, she has bright, intelligent features. The girl has brains—she's going to study journalism.
>
> Miss Biswas, Benjamin et al. five Indians are on their way to study nursing.[20]

Travel accounts by women have been read as explorations of the Self beyond the domestic world. For Krishnabhabini, who published her work anonymously, it was important perhaps to posit herself as a 'Bengali Lady' in the title of her work in order to connect more closely to her 'Bengali sisters' back home whom she addresses specifically in the Prelude to her work,

> My female readers! I was also cloistered in a house like you; I had no relationship with my country or the world. [. . .] Maybe like me, many of you are curious to know about England and to fulfill that desire I am dedicating this book, *A Bengali Lady in England*, to you.[21]

The question, then, is not only of self-exploration, but of creating a larger community of women, bringing them into focus even while they remain 'invisible'—"cloistered in a house". By addressing her female readers (one wonders how many of Krishnabhabini's 'Bengali sisters' had read her work when it was first published), Krishnabhabini is able to inscribe them into a larger world.

Krishnabhabini's more explicit concern is the condition of women and how it is to be improved. In a chapter titled 'English Lady', Krishnabhabini describes the labour, leisure, appearance, and lifestyle of English women, occasionally drawing parallels with Indian Hindu women back home. The description is not uncritical, but praise and focus remain on the virtues of independence and the drawbacks of the Indian male who is too weak to lead Indian women to the path of liberation gradually. Michael Fischer, in his Foreword to Somdatta Mondal's translation of Krishnabhabini's work has pointed out that of the two central dilemmas the text grapples with, one is how Krishnabhabini and her compatriots can preserve their own culture and values while simultaneously being Anglicised.[22] This

chapter ends with a verse that addresses the 'sisters of Bengal' and reflects some of this dilemma. Krishnabhabini writes:

XIII

I've cut off the shackles, even then sister
I cannot feel happiness without you
So I see your tearful and desolate figure
Day in and out.

XIV

If you can taste a little happiness
Of independence in your captive lives
You will not want to stay in this prison
Or cover your face with a veil.

XV

It is true there's no shame to cover our faces
It's only our heart's delusion.
So I say, rise up quickly again
Don't spend time in false fear.[23]

Half a decade later, Durgabati's "rationalised, comparative assessment of the condition of women in Bengal and in England displays her critique of Euro-centric perceptions through an analysis of alternative cultural traditions."[24]

If Krishnabhabini and Durgabati's works, separated by half a decade, are placed alongside each other, there are certain developments we shall be able to trace which will be relevant to our reading of Das's journal and letters as well. In doing so, this article does not seek to address the relationship between travel and nationalism in the colonial context. It suffices to say here that within the discourse of nationalism, the changing role of women, their active participation in the public world and public discourse was reflected in their accounts of travel.

Durgabati Ghosh was born circa 1905. Her father was the renowned psychoanalyst Girindrashekhar Basu. She travelled to England and parts of Europe in 1932 with her husband. *Paschimjatriki*—her travelogue—was published as a book in 1936. Durgabati Ghosh's journey to Europe appears to be a leisure trip. She is travelling with her husband, following an itinerary designed by Thomas Cook.[25]

Durgabati, like Krishnabhabini before her, seems to be standing at a distance when she describes the life of the English women she witnesses. Krishnabhabini is aware that her sartorial choices may be looked upon with scorn and defends herself against her adoption of English customs:

> It has been several months since I came to England. I have started eating and dressing like the English; maybe, if a native person saw me now, he would make fun of me as a 'pucca memsahib' […] But again, we have to see that just changing external clothes and other things does not change the mind; wearing foreign clothes does not mean you have lost all love for your country.[26]

Thus, even though she has spent a considerable time in England, Krishnabhabini projects herself as someone who is still on the outside, whatever her external appearances may suggest. Her chapter on the English Lady too places her as someone physically on the outside, looking in to the lives of 'Others', while using a comparative lens.

It has been pointed out that a peculiarity of women's accounts of travel is the inversion of the traveller's gaze.[27] Even as they gaze at the world around them, they become objects of the world's gaze. Durgabati Ghosh seems to be quite disgruntled with the attention she receives in Italy:

> One evening when we sat down for dinner, I suddenly noticed an Italian lady calling me. At first I thought that I had fallen

> victim to another uncivilised woman and there were reasons behind this belief. There have been several instances in the streets of Italy when women called me and when I went closer, they made uncouth gestures with their hands. But this lady was not of that kind [...] From my sari she had recognised me as an Indian lady...[28]

Nalini Das and her companions also become subjects of interest on the streets of Paris. Instead of being annoyed, she appears to have found it amusing:

> A really funny thing happened when all of us went to the opera together. It's difficult to say if the people paid more attention to us or to the opera. Of course, when they see us all roaming around in our saris, people of all countries stare at us. [...] Wherever we go, [in Paris] a crowd gathers on the street. They look at us and say, 'What lovely clothes,' and call to others to come and look. There's no end to the number of people who photographed us. Some ask for permission, some don't. An artist even made Bachchu di sit for a portrait, then he made a sketch of Bani. Another photographed Irene next to a Greek statue. It's not as though they gape at us. They look at our clothes with the gaze of an artist.[29]

Durgabati posits herself in a location similar to Krishnabhabini's and uses the tool of comparison. She seems to be more acutely aware, as Gupta has pointed out, of cultural differences that make it difficult and perhaps even unrealistic for Indian women to adopt the British lifestyle. She writes,

> People who returned to India after staying in England often commented that the English women were much more hard

> working than our women at home. [...] but once I was here I realised that English women, if they were to work like us, they would never have been able to compete with us.[30]

Why?

The traditional Indian meal involved grinding spices, chopping vegetables; it mandated washing hands if someone touched meat or fish or eggs. In a joint family, meals were prepared according to the convenience of others. In England, the convenience of the person cooking was of primary importance. Such inherent differences, notes Durgabati, makes the adoption of English customs almost impossible in an Indian (Hindu) context.[31] She notes another fundamental difference between the two cultures,

> Both men and women here understand the need for taking care of their health and so work as well as enjoy themselves accordingly. How many people in our country have such a comprehensive understanding?[32]

In Nalini Das, we notice a change in the position of the observer. Her location is what this article has called the location of the 'resident outsider'. Unlike Krishnabhabini and Durgabati, who are clearly standing at a distance, Nalini Das, in forging new friendships in foreign lands, often situates herself within this world, and yet, must also always be outside of it—a position she herself also seems to be aware of. This is reflected in her interactions with her friend Polly Ann Garner, affectionately referred to as 'Paglee' (a mad woman).

The first mention of Polly is in a letter dated 27, December, 1945. Das writes,

> The girls from the college have sent so many postcards that my mantelpiece is quite full. Some have sent presents. Paglee

> has sent a large parcel. Apples from the tree, home-made cake, sweets, and pie—various kinds of lucky charms and knickknacks (40).

Das had arrived in England in October. It seems as though she has already struck up a close friendship with Polly within two months. We also get a glimpse of life in a country home in the letter Das writes from Gosberton, Spalding dated 24 February, 1946.

> Gosberton is a small village. But it cannot be compared to the villages of our country. Here they have electricity, underground drain, paved roads—everything. Their house is small but beautiful, clean, the bathroom and kitchen are tiled and sparkling. They have no servants. They only have farm-hands—domestic chores are all performed by the mistress of the house, the girls also help out. But they're not letting us do anything at all.[33]

Das uses no tools of comparison here with regards to the life led by the women of the household. When she does, it is in context of the landscape and the abject condition of the working classes. In her letters, the life of young English women—working, travelling, or spending time in leisure—is linked in a way to her own life abroad. They are a part of her life as she is of theirs.

In Bude, she befriends Miss Simpson, a missionary woman who is their landlady.

> There's no end to what she did for us. The white-haired old woman waked around with us and showed us all the sights. She lives in Digo. Because she couldn't invite us home, she treated us to coffee in a café.[34]

In her travels in the Continent, Das mentions befriending a Swiss

girl named Helen, a Czechoslav [sic] girl, and a Polish woman named Madame Janowska.[35]

Most importantly, however, Das offers her unintended readers the story of travelling with women. In the works of Krishnabhabini, Abala Basu, Durgabati Ghosh, and many others, even though they are travelling with someone else, and even though they use a collective pronoun in Bengali, the sense they convey is of a singularity. Nalini Das's letters possibly present to us the beginnings of a kind of travel writing that takes the collective experience into account. Unintended for publication, the letters are spontaneous even after surviving the editor's pen. Thus, they express not only the joy of travelling together, but also the pain—often making for humorous moments, very often generated at the cost of the author's patience.

Seeing the small rooms, kerosene lamps, and no attached bath at the Youth Hostel in Exeter, Layla, the author's companion, was quite annoyed. "She was grumbling so much," writes Das, "that we almost had a quarrel!"[36]

In a letter from Bude dated 9 April, 1946, the author describes an "amusing" incident that took place while they were changing trains.

> I was pulling Layla's gigantic suitcase. Suddenly, its handle remained in my grasp and the box landed on the other side. I don't know what we'll do if it can't be fixed at Bude. They go on tours with large tins of 'Cow and Gate', 'Ovaltine', 'Radio Malt'. In huge boxes they have threads and needles, toiletries and other make-up. Yet I had repeatedly said to them that we won't get someone to carry our luggage everywhere—be prepared to carry your own luggage. Don't bring too many things.[37]

Das's letters also introduce us to a world of travel where small trips are spent in youth hostels and cheap guest houses—'budget tours'—to use a more modern phrase.

The letters show that Das and her companions travelled quite prolifically. Thus it will not be possible to discuss each of their trips, unique though they are in their own right in their landscape and the experience the author and her companions had there. But it is worthwhile to provide a list of the places she visited to understand the full extent of the travels she undertook. These are the places she travelled to after arriving in England. The list includes her travels in the Continent.

1. England—Cambridge, Oxford, Spalding (Lincolnshire), Granchester, Bournemouth, Exeter, Bude, Gloucester, Chester, Lake Districts.
2. Wales—Harlech, Snowdon, Carnarvon.
3. France—Paris, Fountainebleau
4. Switzerland—Saint Maurice, Geneva
5. Denmark—Elsinore
6. Sweden—Lund, Halsinborg.
7. Scotland

According to the editor of her journal and letters, the author had probably toured the north of England towards the end of her stay. Amita Dutta, Polly Ann Garner, and Nalini Das were most enthusiastic travellers and had gone hiking in the Lake Districts and Scotland. Unfortunately, the author did not describe these experiences in her letters.[38]

A second feature about the landscapes worth mentioning at this point is that in her letters, Nalini Das often compares the rural landscape of England and the wild natural beauty of Wales to landscapes back home. The ruins of Tintern Abbey brings back memories of Ajanta and Ellora.[39] A small hostel in a village in Exeter reminds her of Ranchi or Hazaribagh.[40] She finds herself thinking of Birbhum when she sees the red soil of Bournemouth.[41] Such reminiscences not only indicate that she has been a prolific

traveller back home, it also reminds us that 'home' is ever present in travelogues—in objects, in landscapes, in memories, and in conversations.

CONCLUSION

Travelling and writing in the 1940s, Nalini Das has left behind a home on the threshold of independence and travelled to a war-ravaged continent. Her letters, especially, reveal her political concerns, and offer us a unique glimpse into the rapidly changing condition of India as her husband sends her clippings from newspapers in Calcutta.

In the letter dated 23 December, 1945, she complains about the distorted news about India that British papers print and expresses her desire to receive news of her country.[42] Two months later, she mentions that headlines are using words such as 'Riot', 'Hooligans', and 'Mob Violence' to describe the condition of India.[43] In August, 1946, she writes from Switzerland:

> At least we would get newspapers in England—'India and Burma News Summary'. It's very difficult to get English newspapers here. I've heard from others that a civil war has broken out in Calcutta. I do not know if this is the truth or a lie. But it made me very sad.[44]

Her interactions with her new acquaintances in England and other parts of the Continent centre largely around India where a division between 'Us' and 'Them' emerges more explicitly, bringing her identity as an 'outsider' back into focus. In Cambridge, she is invited to tea at the home of a Professor of Botany whose octogenarian mother who had spent thirty years in Bombay tells her, "I love India very much. When I was there, we co-existed quite peacefully. Why are you quarrelling with us now?"[45]

Others are more sympathetic. Polly's father, a Socialist, the author thinks, is of the opinion that India should immediately be given its independence and that its continued subjugation will only benefit a handful of big businessmen in England.[46] Miss Simpson tells her she feels proud to walk around with them in Bude.[47]

Nalini Das returned to India in 1946. A few months later, Chitrita Devi travelled to England with her family on the first ship allowed to make this crossing after the end of the War. She had, in fact, had been present in the British Parliament on 3 June, 1947, when Atlee read out the White Paper on India declaring that India would be granted independence. She recorded her experiences in her travelogue *Anek Sagar Periye* [*Across Many Seas*].[48]

Nalini Das's journal and letters and Chitrita Devi's travelogue may be read as a culmination of almost a century of Bengali-Hindu women's travel accounts of journeying to the West. In many ways, their accounts still contain traces of their predecessors—in their description of the sea voyage or the picturesque quality of the English countryside. In other ways, they stand apart from some of the women who came before them—having found strength in their own voices, they had no need to hide their names or apologise for their words.

NOTES

1 The English translations from the journal and letters of Nalini Das are by this author.

2 See, for instance, Jayati Gupta, *Travel Writing, Travel Culture and Bengali Women 1870-1940* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021); Somdatta Mandal, "Mapping the Female Gaze: Women's Travel Writing from Colonial Bengal", in *Indian Travel Narratives,* ed. Somdatta Mandal (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), 126-151.

3 Gupta, 25.

4 For more on this, see, Gupta, 21-24; Simonti Sen, *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870–1910* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005), 60.

5 Gupta, 24.
6 Mandal, 128-129.
7 Gupta, 25.
8 Somdatta Mandal, introduction to Krishnabhabini Das, *A Bengali Lady in England*, trans. Somdatta Mandal (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), xviii.
9 Michael Fisher, foreword to *A Bengali Lady in England*, trans. Somdatta Mandal (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), xi–xii.
10 See, Malavika Karlekar, "Anatomy of Change: Early Women Doctors", *India International Centre Quarterly 39*, no. 3/4 (2012-2013): 95-106; Sharmita Ray, "Women Doctors' Masterful Manoeuverings: Colonial Bengal, Late Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Centuries." *Social Scientist 42*, no. 3/4 (2014): 59-76.
11 Gupta, 23.
12 Gupta, 84-92.
13 *Amitananda Das, introduction to Europe er Chithhi*, ed. Amitananda Das (Kolkata: New Script, 2016).
14 Das, introduction.
15 Abala Basu's travelogues, for instance.
16 It remains outside the scope of this paper to discuss the impact and significance of photography on travel and travel writing. Nalini Das refers numerous times to photographs she has taken and sent, as well as failed attempts, and often about the lack of films in London shops.
17 Sen, 60.
18 Nalini Das, *Europe er Chithhi*, ed. Amitananda Das (Kolkata: New Script, 2016), 15.
19 Das, 20.
20 Das, 16.
21 Krishnabhabini, 1.
22 Fisher, xii.
23 Krishnabhabini, 85.
24 Gupta, 29.
25 Gupta, 93.
26 Krishnabhabini, 33.
27 Mandal, 147.
28 Durgabati Ghosh, *Westward Traveller,* trans. Somdatta Mandal (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 85-86.
29 Das, 86.
30 Ghosh, 47-48.
31 Ghosh, 48.
32 Ghosh, 48.

33 Das, 45.
34 Das, 62.
35 Das, 87.
36 Das, 58.
37 Das, 60.
38 Das, 117.
39 Das, 65
40 Das, 58.
41 Das, 60.
42 Das, 38.
43 Das, 46.
44 Das, 103.
45 Das, 42.
46 Das, 48.
47 Das, 61.
48 Chitrita Devi's travelogue, because of the period in which it is set, signals the sense of an ending of an era. For more, see, Nupur Chaudhuri, "Reactions of Two Bengali Women Travelers: Krishnobhabini Das and Chitrita Devi", in *Historic Engagements with Occidental Cultures, Religions, Powers: Perceptions from Europe and Asia*, eds. Anne. R. Richards and Iraj Omidvar (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 165-182; Mandal, 132.

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The Unrestrained Echoes: Reading Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp* and Ismat Chughtai's *Life in Words*

Ananya Sarkar and Debapriya Sarkar

> I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too have felt so full of luminous torrents that I burst . . . [1]

Mnemosyne, a Titan, was the Greek goddess of Memory. From the illustrious deity would soon come the faculties to remember, to utilise logic and intellect, and to make proper use of rhetoric. Language thus, since time immemorial, became intricately related to a yearning for past memories and a time long gone. It is this distinctive quality of words that marks autobiographical writings as a unique literary genre, characterized by an unusual investigation into the author's own psyche. It involves a retrospective evaluation of one's own ideas about the self and hence centres around complicated questions of memory, truth and time. However, the search for an "I" within a non-fictional narrative becomes an even more difficult quest for women who constantly have to break free from the shackles of gendered prejudices to resume their journey into the deeper crevices of their minds. In a society that constantly suppresses women as the subservient sex, it is indeed a herculean task to free one's own desires, wants and needs from the iron curtains of parochial restrictions and present them naked in the public eye.

Although 'self' is often depicted as being "genderless, sexless, raceless, ageless and classless, feminists argue that these notions of 'self' are designed to mask a white, healthy, youthfully middle-aged,

middle class and heterosexual man".[2] It is thus only held appropriate for men to establish and eulogize the socio-culturally valorised image of their masculine "self" in writing, as opposed to women who are largely the "Other" face of society—the meek, the inglorious, the ordinary. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* was absolutely correct in pointing out that in a society "He is the Subject, He is the Absolute—she is the 'Other'", explicitly documenting why the exploration of a tangible identity is such a concerning issue for feminists across all ages. Female autobiographies in that respect thus become a tool for social transgression itself—a medium to disregard the patricentric rules of society that desperately try to stifle women's voices and strangle their exigencies.

It is interesting to note, however, that when autobiography as a genre first started gaining prominence in India as a result of the Literary Renaissance that began with India's contact with England, it was unanimously discarded by male writers as a frivolous form that did not ask for any serious effort. As a result, 19th century India saw a significant rise in female figures involving themselves in the secret task of writing autobiographies. Autobiography as a genre thus irreplaceably intertwined itself with the objective of the literary rebirth of women. The female autobiographies, however instead of being just a mere retelling of individual experiences, served as a medium through which the writers avowed their identity, establishing an unmitigated authority over their own creations—something that they possibly could not experience elsewhere under the puissant grasp of patriarchal conventions. The moment women started picking up their pens, albeit in an extremely furtive and wary manner, was monumental—it finally delineated a strong deviation from the literary portrayal of the "ideal Indian woman" as propagated by the obdurate male gaze, be it in the depiction of the chaste Sita or in the characterization of the demure "Matangini" (*Rajmohan's wife*). By writing their own stories and by laying bare the malicious carcass of contemporary society, women finally succeeded in slowly

demystifying the superficial figure of the "ideal woman" by taking a significant step towards adding another page to "herstory".

Malavika Karlekar, in her book entitled *Voices from Within* (1991), notes that any personal writing by a woman is a conscious act to reflect upon her inner mind, thus helping to form for herself "a sense of self". This holds true for Rassundari Devi, the first female autobiographer in India, and the long line of venerable women who followed her, waging an undeclared war against "*male*volent" society and its cornucopian machineries to debar any liaison between women and personal literature. As the conflict with the British colonial forces accreted in the mid-1900s, more women started taking up their pens, shattering years of deliberate denigration and objectification. Even at the expense of being labelled the "wicked women" of their days, fierce and revolutionary writers like Amrita Pritam, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Ismat Chughtai, Fahmida Riaz among others, became daring champions of women's rights, inventing a language for the "second sex".

This paper aims to read the autobiographical works of two of the strongest female voices of the past century—Amrita Pritam and Ismat Chughtai—through the lens of what Cixous termed as the "écriture feminine" and draw a parallel between their ideologies, beliefs and unadulterated, often contentious, acts of transgression. Introduced by Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa", écriture feminine refers to a definite feminine style of writing that can be considered eccentric and even incomprehensible at times—a sign characteristic of the years of suppression levied upon the female voice. Evading male monopoly, such a language staunchly talks of and asserts the agency of the woman as an individual herself. This paper argues that both Pritam and Chughtai consciously or unconsciously revelled in the freedom that came with the use of such a language. Both the writers were uninhibited and seldom were intimidated by male disapproval—a quality manifested unequivocally through their autobiographical voices. While Chughtai grounded her authorial

voice in the unpolished visage of reality, Amrita Pritam expressed her radical views with mellifluous poetic sensibility. But what becomes a sturdy commonality between them is the relentless assertion of their unassailable individuality over the pages of literature. The Gorgons of their times—they broke the expectations of what and how women were expected to speak, giving free expression to 'dangerous' ideas and passions, with an unparalleled frankness.

AMRITA: THE REBEL, THE ICONOCLAST, THE OTHER

Unabashedly intrepid and eloquent, both in her writings and personal life, Amrit Kaur alias Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was an epitome of everything that a woman of her time was not permitted to be—a vociferous writer, an uninhibited lover and a true defier of regressive social confinements.

Pritam's father, a poet himself, had named his daughter "Amrit", the Punjabi word for elixir. Blessed with the grace of immortality, Pritam's writings went on to become a fortuitous manifestation of her rejection of a patriarchal world order. Her autobiography, *Raseedi Ticket* (The Revenue Stamp) stands as a representation of her dissentious soul. Her narrative "subtly presents an alternative history and severs itself from a typical misogynist nationalistic discourse",[3] as it portrays a staunch resistance against the accepted conventions of religion and morality. Her unwonted approach towards life is reflected in the unusual way in which she starts the first chapter of her autobiography: "Is it doomsday?"

Pritam's chronicle of her birth and the years that followed portray a significant inquisitive nature that does not move back from questioning her theist father about the existence of God, after her mother's death:

> "There is no God."
> "You mustn't say that."
> "Why not?"[4]

Despite coming from a strict orthodox background, the author hardly cared about maintaining the pious image of the archetypal subservient daughter of the house, and staunchly questioned the soundness of religion, when she found out that her grandmother kept separate tumblers for Hindus and Muslims. An agonised Pritam failed to understand the relevance of a religious boundary that hindered humanitarian tenets of harmony and refused to follow any commandment of the same.

She questioned "the entire stratified social scheme" and articulated her desire to change the stifling parochialities of the religious dictums with the more empowering doctrine of 'Ruhaniyat' (Spirituality). Her rebellion soon found its way into words, as she consciously defied her father's mandates to meditate on God and write religious verses. Instead, she delved deeper into her own spirit, seeking a partner for herself in an imaginary fragment of her mind, 'Rajan'. Refusing to think about God, a young Amrita Pritam consciously transgressed the man-made moral boundaries, by fabricating her reveries around the fancies of her own mind. She admits dreaming about being entrapped in a "big dark castle" or being chased by a vexed mob, only to escape and transcend into a territory that was exclusively her own. The autobiography, just like her dreams, echoes the resonating cries of a defiant mind enmeshed in a society that demands absolute subordination.

Rebellious thoughts thus entered her mind, which she deliberately tried suppressing by tearing up her writings, only to understand slowly that she was a terrible social misfit. Growing more aware of her own conscience, she soon picked up her pen to give vent to her blasphemous convictions, gradually creating a literary niche of her own.

Hence in Pritam, one can find a deliberate endeavour to break the barriers of social rules and to present an empowered narrative, juxtaposed with an assertive individuality that refuses to bow down

before masculine autocracy. Her writing, from a very early age, is testimony to her resistance. Pritam consciously tries to deviate from the phallocentric tendency of articulating one's thoughts in a male-gendered vernacular, which reaches its zenith in her portraiture of the different aspects of her feminine self. She is essentially a woman in a man's world, gifted with an iron will and the power to defy. She is not afraid of anyone, nor does Pritam care about the variegated social agents—a fact that she harps on occasionally in *The Revenue Stamp*. She does not mince her words and directly uses her authorial voice to chastise the critics who had often denounced her writing for being too "sensuous". Condemnation did not stop following her for long; even her autobiography was accused of being a public depiction of her vendetta against past enemies. It is interesting to note that Pritam knew quite well about the possible backlash she might face after the publication of *The Revenue Stamp* (which authorities were urged to ban), and yet she composed the book, with a characteristic unflinching boldness that is reflected in almost all her writings. She does not shy away from openly confessing her habit of chain-smoking, that was complemented by occasional drinking. Her uniqueness as an author however lies in the way she poetically evokes the idea of "*kraah prasad*" to insinuate that the cigarette becomes a purer concoction in her hand, only to help make her thoughts "ready for distribution". By attaching a religious undertone to an otherwise stigmatized subject, she simultaneously defends her cause and expresses her desires with an unchallenged authorial clarity. In an era that looked down upon an open discussion on mental health and even more so, if it concerned a woman, Pritam showed an incredible fortitude in noting down her suicidal thoughts and a gnawing sense of loss and gloom in the pages of her autobiography:

> I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a king wears purple: never to smile again . . . [5]

Pritam hardly regrets her deeds; she openly professes her uncontrollable love for Sahir Ludhianvi in *The Revenue Stamp*. Engaged at four and married off to Pritam Singh at sixteen against her consent, the author never found happiness in her marriage, and eventually left her husband. She fell in love with friend and fellow poet Ludhianvi, sharing an agonising relationship with him that was sustained through letters, silences and echoes. Having started at a *mushaira* (poetry reading session), their love was poetic, as it was tragic. Pritam did not hide her extra-marital affair from the capricious eye of society; instead, she went a step ahead to document the intensity of her longing for Sahir in her autobiography. She confesses to hysterically writing Sahir's name on a piece of paper while being photographed by journalists, and admits being shattered after learning about his new affair. She accepts her past without a trace of any moral dilemma. Crude emotions of intimacy, passion, jealousy and betrayal crept into the pages she wrote and lingered around the forgotten pages of her missing diaries, as she dedicated thousands of words to the lost memories of her one true love. Once she penned down:

> *"Tera milna aisa hota hain jaise koi hatheli par*
> *ek waqt ki roti rakh de"*
> ("Meeting you feels like getting one portion of
> my meal in my hand")

To Pritam, her emotions needed to be reflected—a desire as rudimentary to her as the need for food. Coming out from the ensnared hegemony of accepting that women's physical and emotional impulses were only relevant when considered in context with that of a man's, Pritam gave herself the autonomous agency to feel and act like a truly liberated individual. It is a mystery why she never changed her name ("Pritam" was a marital addition to her name, based on her husband's), but she vehemently denied being entangled in a set-up that restricted her true potential, even if that meant confronting the

accusations of society and eventually her children.

Imroz, with whom Pritam was to later spend forty years together in a live-in relationship, came into her life quite late, at a point when she was dejected, lonely and still in love with Sahir. A painter by profession, Imroz varnished the author's life with hues she had never known:

> "No relationship with man,
> Not one word—father, brother, friend, husband
> Could have described you . . ."[6]

Pritam embraced the dichotomy her mind snared her in, as she struggled between her burning desire for Ludhianvi and the unconditional love Imroz showered on her. Her autobiography documents her deep yearning for Sahir that led her to ravish his used cigarette stubs—a painful trope that she also explored in her novel *Iksi Anita*. And yet, with the same passion she articulates the pangs of guilt she experienced for involving Imroz in her struggle. However, what beautifully highlights the searing lines that she penned down was an unfettered honesty—one that echoed when she insinuated that Imroz was the "15th August" of her life, celebrating the raw liberty with which she embraced her 'sacrilegious' feelings, emotions and wants.

One of the brightest stars of the Progressive Writer's Movement, Pritam sought to fight injustice and advocate the tenets of universal equality. The traumatic Indo-Pakistan partition scarred the author deeply, for she herself was forced to leave Lahore, and this is clearly reflected in her autobiography. She contemplated deeply the lingering sense of dislocation, loss and past memories through the ordeals of her grandfather who refused to leave his home after Partition. An alternative portrayal of India, post-independence, rises through Pritam's words—one that shies away from the boisterous celebrations of freedom that followed August 1947:

> The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood curdling horrors of this historic year.

The utter deprivation and agony of the "homeless" vagrants pained Pritam, who consciously turned the remorseless bloodshed into her ink, composing hymns for the victims on both the sides. Her most famous dirge "*Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah nu*" encapsulated the true horrors of the Partition:

> Rise o beloved of the aggrieved... Someone has blended poison in the five rivers of Punjab

Her novels (like *Pinjar*) and poems distinctively countered the male gaze that looked at the Partition through a lens of community and creed, and extensively articulated the trauma, pain and violence of the everyday world, especially from the veiled view of the doubly marginalised female. She uses the same political, feminist awareness to compose her autobiography and embraces her identity as a "dark" postcolonial woman with candour, by rejecting the "white piece of marble" in her dreams for "the ebony dark damsel" as her "daughter", thus harmonizing her racial, cultural, maternal and creative urges simultaneously.

The Revenue Stamp is resplendent with a scintillating sense of sisterhood, which she facilitated better through her travels and meetings abroad. On one occasion, she met a poet named Zulfia in Tashkent and developed a strong bond with her: "For me Amrita and Zulfia are the names of the same woman". She took up the pen to inspire and emancipate, despite having to bear tremendous criticism and social humiliation. Her writings ruptured the phallocentric discourse and established a fluid, semiotic narrative, which was stridently condemned and denounced. Religious groups attacked her, while uncomfortable male critics hated her audacious flow of

words. And yet, Pritam did not "flinch before looking at a man's eyes" and vocalizing her demands. Writing was an antidote to her, and her pen her exclusive weapon against the deleterious patriarchy. Deconstructing the phallic symbolism attached with the 'pen', Pritam claimed that it was as much a part of her body as her limbs, and had the sole right to be placed beside her when she passed away:

> There have been so many days when I have held my pen close to my breast and wept and wept. It is impossible to say who comes to support you and when. My pen has always been the perceptible...I can hold it to my heart.[7]

Pritam's autobiography is a mesmerising synthesis of various identities: those of a writer, a rebel, a lover and a woman. Khushwant Singh had cynically remarked once that Amrita Pritam could fit her entire life "on the back of a revenue stamp". Aptly titled, *Raseedi Ticket* thus not only became a daring response to a pejorative challenge, but indeed transformed itself into the mouthpiece of a writer par excellence.

ISMAT CHUGHTAI: THE MEDUSA WITH A GLIB TONGUE

"The personal is political",[8] an oft-quoted, powerful phrase attributed to Carol Hanisch, which also served as a rallying slogan of second-wave feminism from the late 1960s, directly pertains to the question of the relevance of autobiographies. Every anecdote chronicled in an individual's biographical account becomes political as it questions the social significance of personal relationships and blurs the lines between private and public spheres. A girl child belonging to a middle-class, seemingly 'progressive' Muslim family, aspiring for something as fundamental as education and subsequently being denied the same, becomes a relevant part of the discussion of the utterly preposterous injustice prevalent so flagrantly in contemporary society. Ismat

Chughtai, one of the dissident authors of Urdu Literature, represents the aforementioned child. She lobbied relentlessly and successfully to get an education and finally embarked on a path to express her voice vociferously in order to subvert and expose the gendered double standards of the patriarchal, feudal structures that subjugated her and her tribe. A resolute iconoclast, Chughtai partook in the pre-partition, anti-imperialist and left-oriented Progressive Writer's Movement and became an eminent figure. She was progressive in every sense of the term and lived up to it by championing the cause of the marginalized, especially, women. Her choice of subjects, like something as bold and contentious as female sexuality, and the style she used to animate them elicited considerable disapproval during her time, but that distinguished her from her equally gifted and trailblazing peers. She carved a niche for herself in the Urdu literary canon and lent a voice to those agonies and conflicted passions that were muffled by the restrictive domestic ambits set for women. It would be no exaggeration to say that the circumstances of her life and art help us understand both the cultural economy in which women write and the politics of canon building as it affected women.[9]

The journey Ismat Chughtai took to establish her authorial identity in order to bring to the foreground her subaltern identities—as a Muslim and a woman, was a perilous struggle. In the normative hyper-nationalistic narratives of feminism in India, the Muslim woman is either erased or contained within the confines of 'purdah' or orthodox stagnation, victimized by her own community; in fact, she is the 'other', against which the picture of emancipation and modernity of more visible upper-caste Hindu women is inscribed.[10] Chughtai's secularized sight did not fail to see the complex intersectionality at play which analyses the 'othering' of the minorities resulting in double subjugation. Rather, she highlights, unequivocally, the ludicrous inequities that were meted out to women notwithstanding their class and religion. Her protagonists, like her, show an inkling for acts of defiance against the phallocentric traditions, like Cixous' Medusas,

transgressing by simply asserting their 'feminine' sensibilities and a free will to wield their agency. Chughtai drew inspiration from the circumstances and the people of her own personal life to craft her fictional world. Needless to say, it becomes imperative to peek into her own life in order to understand how she discovered herself and decided to employ her notorious glib tongue to unmask the follies of the society she grew up in.

Kaghazi Hai Pairahan (Life in Words)is known to be Ismat Chughtai's autobiography written for the Urdu journal *Aaj Kal*, which was published from March 1979 to May 1980. However, like the author herself, this interesting piece of writing has its own distinctive feature which sets it apart. The non-fictional piece of writing consists of 14 chapters with no sense of linearity and captures her metamorphic years right from her childhood till the litigation against her controversial short story, 'Lihaaf'. By employing the stream of consciousness technique, the readers are invited to her mind palace: a museum with each chapter being sporadic pockets of memories carefully exhibiting how her evolution took place. Perhaps it is not realistic to expect a conventional autobiography from such an individualistic, expressive and radical writer like Ismat Chughtai, who never moved on a straight or predictable path, much like the heroine, Shaman, of her autobiographical novel, *Terhi Lakeer* (Crooked Line).[11]

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Englishmen came to India with, as Rudyard Kipling puts it, the white man's burden of civilizing the purportedly uncouth natives. Introduction of anglicized education, especially to the weaker sections of society was a stepping stone towards their orientalist project. The heinous practice of Sati and the deplorable condition of Indian women who had to be perpetually submissive to patriarchs and subject to their capricious chastisements gave impetus to the British to bring about reform in the 1850s by establishing institutions for women's education. However, the poetry of legislation did not distill down to the prose of implementation.

Orthodox social structures looked down upon the very concept of educating a woman, associating it with the seemingly 'blasphemous' profession of prostitution. Emancipation through education was particularly difficult and a distant reality for privileged upper-class daughters and wives as they had to bear the burden of maintaining family honour through the maintenance of purdah or seclusion.[12] Such was the case for Ismat Chughtai as well. Born to Qasim Beg Chughtai, a judicial magistrate, and Nusrat Khanam in a well-off, upper-middle class, Muslim family, Chughtai was one of their six sons and four daughters. The endless row of queasy pregnancies was the reason why her mother "felt nauseated by the very sight of us".[13] Childhood was not really one of her memorable times as is evident from her words: "I got past childhood somehow."[14]

Chughtai recalls her father as a 'Liberal' who, on principle, used to stand up for the rights of women more than those of boys. However, she immediately introduces a tone of derision by undercutting the meaning of 'liberal' because in practice, "girls and boys were equal in the same way as Hindus and Muslims were brothers".[15] There was a clear distinction in the privileges of each family member in accordance with their gender but it was Chughtai who flouted these gender roles outright. She always considered herself a misfit among her sisters who were 'perfect' women adept in the arts of housekeeping and embroidery and also proficient in Urdu, Farsi and the Quran. Chughtai was clumsy and took pleasure in playing with her brothers and learning as much as she could from her elder brother Azim Bhai. She would read the translated Quran and engage in debates with her father's friends with her new-found knowledge. She even rejected donning burkha or hijab as a proclamation of her autonomy over her body; subsequently questioning the visibility of women in the public realm. Although her mother considered these as manly pursuits that did not suit women, it did not curb Chughtai's volition. In a strong attempt to hold on to the family's Mughal roots and not give in to colonial subservience, Chughtai's Taya Abba advocated Farsi as the mother tongue of the

family but such a rebellion bore consequences economically. Hence, from thereon, Qasim Beg made an exception and decided that the men of the family would not study Farsi. Chughtai's brothers mocked her as she had to learn Farsi which compromised her learning and relegated her to an inferior status. In another instance, the extreme antagonism against women's education can be witnessed in the case of her elder sisters going to boarding schools for studying. The entire extended family and associated friends threatened to ostracize her father for committing such an imprudent crime.

Gerda Lerner in her investigation reveals that education is a major area of domination; and the systemic exclusion of girls from educational institutions has perpetuated the subordination of women within the patriarchal structure and she terms this phenomenon as the condition of "trained ignorance".[16] This fear of letting Eves, over the course of time, pick and eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge which would lead to loss of 'innocence' and the collective fall of mankind has been ingrained since the beginning of time. Chughtai had to resort to devious routes in order to get around such perils standing in her way and oust the archaic fear of bringing doom on mankind by letting a woman know too much. It is noteworthy to mention how she rejected the fate designed for her and weaved her own destiny when, on what one might refer to as the most memorable incident of her life, she asserted with fortitude her desire to enroll herself in Aligarh Girl's College and take the matriculation exam. Although there was a lot of opposition in the beginning, she was ultimately victorious in paving her way with the façade of an engagement with Jugnu, the accomplished son of Chughtai's maternal uncle. It is interesting to observe how women played their constraints to their advantage in order to achieve their aspirations. Chughtai promised to marry Jugnu in exchange for her freedom to study: a transaction reflecting the sheer lack of agency women had to work within. However, she did not marry him although she considered him her 'soulmate'. Marrying Jugnu would have robbed Chughtai

of her mercurial elements. Like Emily Dickinson, who denounced her chance at being united with her mortal love for the sake of her immortal Art in her poem 'I Cannot Live with You', Chughtai too, chose the luminous flame raging within her over spending a lifetime with Jugnu, her soulmate. Later in Bombay she met Shahid Latif and their love grew out of a beautiful friendship where Shahid helped Chughtai in honing her literary prowess. With Shahid, she was not tamed and that is what she looked forward to in a lifelong partnership. Initially, Chughtai's accomplishments were never given as much importance by her family as was given to her brother's failures. She received her Bachelor's degree in Humanities from IT College, Lucknow. She went on to become the Inspector of Schools in Bombay while dazzling the Urdu literary circle with her firebrand realistic writings. Chughtai frequently held illiteracy responsible for the despicable plight of women just as, in her case, it was her literacy that freed her from the shackles of conservative sexist moralities. She gained respectability in the eyes of her family who had always considered her an 'imperfect' woman.

On witnessing the subjugation of women perpetuated in every nook and cranny of domestic life, ever since childhood, Ismat grew up with a peculiar disdain towards femininity:

> "I considered femininity a sham, and looked upon compromise as falsehood, patience as cowardice and gratitude as duplicity. I was not in the habit of beating about the bush."[17]

However, it was the male gaze that associated femininity with helplessness and subservience and it took many powerful influences to emancipate her from her patriarchal appropriation and contempt towards her identity as a woman. Chughtai had always been a keen observer of her surroundings. It was the complete reversal of the bitterly abused coachman's daughter Mangu's disposition that ended Chughtai's sense of inferiority about women being weak.

Femininity is a social construct which is subjected to multiple layers of interpretation. Chughtai was never able to come to terms with the patriarchal definition of femininity as it demanded a demure, tongue-tied, self-effacing, submissive ideal of an 'Indian wife'. It is no wonder that when Mangu hit back and revolted against her brutish mother-in-law and husband, she was considered 'possessed' and demon-like and Bacchu Phupi was regarded as an 'incomplete' woman because of her volatile temperament and educated status.

> One of Ismat's literary mentors, Azim Bhai, immortalized in her 'Dozakhi', said, "if you want to say something, wrap the message neatly in a story or a narrative and you will draw less flak. People will read your stories and be influenced by them"[18]

She followed that advice throughout her career as a writer as she essentially deconstructed the pre-conceived notions of femininity and gave it the much-needed female gaze through her fictional characters. 'Ismat' means 'chastity', which is quite antithetical as she was one of those hand-picked writers that celebrated sexual overtness in women and was intersectional and inclusive enough to explicitly write about homosexuality in her strident epoch. However, it would be wrong to compartmentalize Chughtai as an obscene writer and the purveyor of sex that she was labelled as after the controversy around 'Lihaaf'. For her, 'Lihaaf' did prove to be a veritable explosion as it dislocated her identity as a realist. It was only because of her honest story-telling in 'Lihaaf' did the Begum, from whom Chughtai drew her inspiration for the story, break free from a hapless marriage and remarry to experience nuptial bliss. Another instance of her authorial voice creating reverberations was when Chughtai's article, staunchly proclaiming her fearlessness, against Mulla Ahrarvi's disparaging remarks against her alma mater, was published in *Aligarh Gazette* and Shahid Ahrarvi was given a taste of his own dreadful medicine by the brothers of the Aligarh Muslim University from whom she

sought solidarity. In her autobiography, Chughtai recorded the silences and the gagged voices of the women belonging to different strata of society who were stripped of their agency and subjected to brutal retribution from the arbiters of patricentric society when one woman held a mirror up to their ugly, self-serving, dubious intentions. Chughtai understood that the prevalent inequalities were never a case of class, creed, gender or religion but emerged from the desperate need of the flagbearers of moral codes and ethics to maintain the status quo of their lopsided power dynamics.

Chughtai's astute sensitivity towards class, gender and religious discrimination drew her to the ideals of communism and secularism which were introduced to her by Rasheed Jahan. The inferior and vulnerable status of women and people belonging to the lower rungs of society irked her and recollections of the same are amply scattered throughout her autobiography. Her empathy towards the distressed lot is palpable: the evocative way she chronicles the absolute denial of dignity to widows by the society; the gut-wrenching descriptions of little handprints of child wives who were sacrificed at the altar of the sacrilegious practice of Sati in the royal crematorium of Sambhar; the issue of untouchability rampant in the Hindu dominated areas of Sambhar and the treatment meted out to the servants in a familial household. These lurid instances of injustice invoked in Chughtai her unstinting vigor to fight for an egalitarian future.

Chughtai's family was quite progressive in regard to religious politics. One can see the interplay of Chughtai's triple identities: one being an Indian which bestowed on her the inheritance of reveling in festivals like Holi and her Ammi's right to give panditji money for Satyanarayan puja, another being a Muslim who was severely berated for touching the Krishna deity and adoring it like a little baby during Lalaji's Janmashthami puja, and lastly, as a woman. Her religious identity and national belonging and their subsequent intermingling bewildered her. Such a sense of listlessness can be traced in her short story, *Roots* which delves into the displacement of

identities as a Muslim and an Indian during the Partition of India. The development of her secular ethos can be vividly witnessed in her recollection of personal experiences that led to the negotiations among her variegated subaltern 'I's. As Sadaf Jaffer rightly puts it,

> Chughtai's critique of society hinged upon the equality (barābarī) of all Indian people, whether they be women or men, Muslim or Hindu, master or servant. The primacy of "humanity" (*insāniyat*) over other identities was the keystone of her formation of the secular, and has roots as in the longstanding critique of religious boundaries in a tradition that can be termed Islamicate humanism.[19]

Autobiography has always served as a powerful tool for self-construction and self-expression. It brings to the foreground, the nuances of personal life which under critical assessment, can be instrumental as rubrics of a much more grandiose socio-political fabric. A descendant of the fierce Mughals and the Sufi saint Salim Chisti, Ismat Chughtai inherited an unstinting fighting spirit combined with a sublime spirituality. Her glib tongue was unperturbed and always articulated the grim realities of contemporary society. Amrita Pritam, likewise, was an embodiment of resilience, grace and courage. As the popular saying goes, Rome was not built in a day and neither was the metamorphosis of these valorous women with unrestrained voices. Their autobiographical writings can bear testimony to it. Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Rassundari Devi and Kamala Das, they led their rebellions through their puissant pens despite their misogynistic milieus demanding that they be quiet. Thus, one might be bold enough to claim that writing about the self and letting the echoes resonate with the innumerable lives oppressed under the same patriarchal paradigms transcending time, space and borders is a revolution in itself. Like Lilith who earned infamy in the course of his-story for avowing autonomy over her individuality, a woman

retelling her story symbolically of claiming that representative space she has been so long denied. The urgency to pen down her-story can thus, conclusively, be very well explicated by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in The Madwoman in the Attic, observed:

> A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity', is a life of silence that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action', is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.[20]

NOTES

1 Cixous, 876.
2 Dharmani and Sailpar, 483.
3 Dutta, 229.
4 Pritam, 9.
5 Pritam, 34.
6 Pritam, 82.
7 Pritam, 115.
8 Hanisch, an American feminist, wrote an essay of the same name in 1970 which became a rallying slogan during the second-wave feminism.
9 Tharu and Lalitha, xix.
10 Chughtai, xiv
11 Chughtai, X
12 Nayeem, 35
13 Chughtai, 1.
14 Chughtai, 8.
15 Chughtai, 8.
16 Nayeem, 36.
17 Chughtai, 10.
18 Chughtai, 13.
19 Jaffer, 2.
20 Gilbert and Gubar, 36.

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The Unchaste Narmada: River of Penance and Lust

JULIE BANERJEE MEHTA

The stream took on the form of a woman—a beautiful virgin, innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl . . . [1]

From Shiva's penance you became water.
From water you became a woman
So beautiful that gods and ascetics
Their loins hard with desire
Abandoned their contemplations,
To pursue you . . .
The Terrible One was moved to laughter.
To watch you the Destroyer said,
Oh damsel of the beautiful hips,
Evoker of Narma, lust,
Be known as Narmada
Holiest of Rivers.[2]

"Did you know 'narmada' means a whore in Sanskrit?"[3]

This project examines the treatment of foundational Hindu myths embedded in the novel *A River Sutra*, in order to explore how they coax out of the religious tradition, a cluster of both sacred and profane trajectories that either reflect or distort the archetypes. I argue that Gita Mehta represents the Narmada River as a bridge between the worlds of myth and reality, as an ideological consensus

between Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism, and sutures her narrative to the pressing issues of ecological destruction to this river.

The plot is deceptively simple: the Narrator, a retired Indian civil servant, thinks he has escaped life in the city by seeking refuge and spending his twilight years managing a government rest-house overlooking the sacred Narmada. Almost instantly he realises his folly and finds himself encountering life in the raw, more so than he had as a bureaucrat. Strategically located near the sacred sites along the river, the Narmada rest-house represents a confluence of sacred and secular spaces. The inn becomes the crossroads of the lives of the many guests that flow, like Narmada's own tides and indeterminate geography, in and out of its doors. As the ascetic Professor Shankar points out to the Narrator, "You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my friend …too many lives converge on these banks."[4] The ex-civil servant becomes the storyteller as his life collides with those of ascetics, minstrels, tribals, and monks who all have their stories to tell. The six stories, loosely bound together by an active Narrator who performs the function of a *sutradhar*[5] or a storyteller, are about a young and wealthy diamond merchant who becomes a Jain monk, the murder of an innocent singer with an exceptional musical talent, the seduction of a tea plantation executive by a tribal woman who possesses his spirit, the tale of a courtesan abducted by a bandit and finally driven to suicide, the story of a musician who cannot come to terms with her physical disfigurement and consequent abandonment by her betrothed, and the tale of an eminent anthropologist who becomes a mendicant of the *Naga* cult (followers of a *tantric* band of Siva worshippers), and subsequently returns to his profane existence after saving a child from being sold into prostitution. The Narrator serves as a link between the sacred and the secular spheres "by inhabiting an autonomous cultural space that allows him religions and mythologies."[6] The Goddess Narmada, in this novel, is referred to as "Her holiness,"[7] and "a whore".[8]

MYTHS: BRIDGING EAST AND WEST

In the first part of this paper, I explore the nuanced ways in which author Gita Mehta creates the six stories that reflect and re-present the myth of the river goddess Narmada. Hidden among these six narratives is yet another myth—that of the Aryan immortal who slumbers on the banks of the river Narmada,[9] in deathless sleep—which I unpack in the course of my analysis. And in the course of my interrogation, I unpack the myth of the *Naga* that has a strong pan-Indian presence, connecting East and West—not just Assam and Gujarat, but India and Greece as well.

In *A River Sutra,* one of the characters, Dr. Mitra, points out that the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada: "The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathised with the river's mythology but at least they only had to deal with one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in."[10] In Mehta's novel, the story of Nitin Bose and Rima reveals how patriarchy must ultimately learn to respect the power of the divine feminine that resides in a myriad manifestations: in the sacred waters of the Narmada, in the serpent cult of the Vanos, and in the character of the tealeaf-picker, Rima.

Since *A River Sutra* incorporates both oral and written traditions of mythmaking (including myths from Hinduism as well as those based in folk cults) these narratives lend themselves to my analysis of how sacred myths evolve in a profane framework.[11] In *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*, Hegel maintains, "Every nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints, who live on in the nation's traditions, whose stories and deeds the nurse tells to her charges and so wins them over by impressing their imagination."[12] Although he was critical of the domination of the Indian family by patriarchy, it is easy to connect Hegel with postcolonial theorists

such as Dipankar Gupta[13] and Gopal Balakrishnan.[14] The Hegelian idea of metaphors that inspire and enliven the national imagination, sparking and awakening the "sacred" and the "secular," is reiterated by both these postcolonial theorists. As suggested by Gupta's root metaphors, which posit: "A multivocal regnant set of meanings of root metaphors allows us a perspective on culture that is neither individualistic nor consensual. The multiple saliences in the regnant set of meanings arises from varying locations of actors and groups in society," Hegel's claim too seems to support the argument that "gods and nation's heroes and myths are all linked with public spheres of national events, memorials and temples."[15] A useful lens to view the idea of root metaphors is to turn to Stephen C. Pepper's *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence.* Written in 1942, the seminal study presents four relatively adequate world hypotheses (or world views or conceptual systems) in terms of their root metaphors: formism (similarity), mechanism (machine), contextualism (historical act), and organicism (living system). In World Hypotheses, Pepper demonstrates the error of *logical positivism,* that there is no such thing as data free from interpretation, and that root metaphors are necessary in epistemology. In other words, objectivity is a myth because there is no such thing as pure, objective fact. Consequently, an analysis is necessary to understand how to interpret these 'facts.' Pepper does so by developing the "[root metaphor method, . . .] and outlines what he considers to be four basically adequate world hypotheses: formism, mechanism, contextualism, and organicism." He identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each of the world hypotheses as well as the paradoxical and sometimes mystifying effects of the effort to synthesize them.[16]

I argue that the sacred and the profane are constantly blurring boundaries and borders because by their very nature they are "two faces of the same coin" and cannot be contained within paradigmatic geographies. And Eliade fits well with my own argument about the boundless fluidity in the physicality of water, which by its very nature

resists constraint and containment. Moreover, *A River Sutra*, with refreshing contemporaneity, echoes Eliade's multiple theory of cluster myths, where the principal myth of the ascetic Siva and his daughter Narmada is echoed in the profane canvas of parent-child relationships that punctuate the many tellings. These tellings include the story of the musician who was deformed and stood up on her wedding day by her betrothed, but was vindicated by the love of her father; the story of Shankar, the archaeologist-turned *Naga* ascetic and Uma, the female infant whom he rescued from an abusive brothel-keeper; the story of the beautiful young woman who fell in love with the bandit who forcefully abducted her, and her meeting with her weary mother after years; and the story of the exceptionally talented infant, the singer Imrat, who was murdered because he had a melodious voice, and who left an inconsolable teacher-father grieving for him. Thus, Eliade avers in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: "The sacred is significantly different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophany" (the manifestation of the sacred).[17]

Postcolonial activist-writers such as Gita Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy concur that their politics and their fiction are affected by the myths they heard during their childhood. Arundhati Roy acknowledges that "listening to stories, or reading them as a child—I read voraciously as a child—made you think deeply. We didn't have television so hours were spent in contemplation when we went fishing".[18] Later, the stories "drove" her to write about Velutha and Ammu: "I had two options: writing or madness." Amitav Ghosh, on the other hand, celebrated the oral repository of stories that he had heard right from the time he left Dhaka, in 1965, when he was only seven years old: "All that I heard and saw became a part of a strange and moving experience and I remembered the details when I was working on *The Shadowlines*".[19] But it is Gita Mehta, perhaps, who most succinctly concedes how inspirational myths have

invigorated her as a writer:

> Myths are extremely powerful tools and can convey a whole range of meanings. As I say in my preface to *Karma Cola*,[20] since East and West increasingly meet under such unlikely circumstances, it might be wise to remember two myths—one Eastern, one Western—which provide a cautionary note to the human race. The Indian myth maintains we are living in the age of Kalyug which presages the end of the world. Kalyug is characterised by speed. Speed, being the enemy of reflection, will spread fantasy with such velocity that humans, in their pursuit of escape, will ultimately destroy themselves. The Western myth, as expressed in Goethe's *Faust,* introduces the devil as a poodle, welcomed as something harmless and amusing until it turns into the implacable force that exacts damnation as the price of greed.[21]

THE NARMADA: BRIDGING THE SPACE OF MYTH AND THE SPACE OF REALITY

In the course of this interrogation of the flux between the sacred and the profane I pose a string of questions: Does the sacred permeate the profane? Is the private appropriated by the public sphere? How do the stories created by human beings become mirrors in which the myths of the divine are reflected?

The river, like the government-run Narmada rest-house, where the nameless Narrator resides, and through which a motley brood of hustlers, bandits, ascetics, archaeologists, civil servants, and tribals constantly transit, becomes what Foucault terms heterotopia. In "Different Spaces" Foucault uses this term to refer to actual locations that can both reflect and challenge the stratifications of other social spaces or times in a single locale.[22] The Narmada, as a river, becomes an "excellent"[23] heterotopic space since the Narmada River[24] and its

surrounding areas are both a sacred crucible (where people fasting unto death or immolating themselves on its banks, or drowning in her waters, gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth), and a profane space (where child prostitution, abject poverty, larceny, and killings are a part of everyday existence, as the six tales bear testimony).

I also draw attention to how the divine feminine, as reflected in the geo-body of the goddess Narmada, actually encourages analysis of fluidity, and in turn infects the reading of the text itself by releasing fluidity: a profound subject is explored with effortless ease, and enables the prose of *A River Sutra* to flow like a sacred stream. The lucidity of the narrative style has a certain luminosity about it that reminds the reader of the *jyoti* or light that is associated with this river in related myths where she becomes the space where immortals pass through the mortal plane. This encourages the reader to dissolve the rigid binary of boundaries, ultimately enabling the Narmada's powers to infiltrate the text.[25]

Mehta's novel deploys transformability (which occurs when the profane is represented in the sacred, and the sacred in the profane) in order to resist colonial and nationalistic projects to contain women in the making of a postcolonial nation. Here masculine identity is represented as a "flight from the feminine," and male asceticism and penance is represented as an escape from involvement with human relationships: the archaeologist V.V. Shankar who becomes an ascetic comes back to a "normal life" when his asceticism is touched by the plight of Uma, the female infant he rescues from a brothel. Theweleit's argument that male fear stems from women's overwhelming capacity to arouse male desire, and makes the male perpetually anxious about the loss of agency and ego, is appropriately applied to Mehta's narrative.[26] The dread of women and the fear of subjugation by the female directly affects male agency in all six narratives that make up the novel. With versatility and intertextuality, Mehta employs the argument that there is a deep-seated fear at the

heart of patriarchy of this uncontainable quality of feminine power, through each of the six short narratives. This *sutra*, or thread, as reflected in the title of the novel, forms a link or a bridge across the narratives. In each story Mehta sources, targets, narrates, and unpacks male anxiety about female sexuality and its latent power. The process of exploration may be different every time, but the underlying message is a series of echoes of the original Narmada myth, which are reflected in the question the Narrator asks repeatedly through the novel: "I imagine the ascetics sitting in the darkness like myself, their naked bodies smeared in ash . . . with the waves of the Narmada gently lapping at their thighs. And I wonder what their thoughts are about this loose-limbed seductress, the beautiful Narmada, Siva's daughter?"[27] The reader is constantly persuaded to wander between the sacred, mythical world and the profane, mundane world, and to ponder "whether the ascetics are threatened by the beauty of the river from their meditations," which is their path to ultimate power, and the key to release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The invocation of the Narmada finds articulation in the pre-colonial *Skandapurana* and in the *Ramayana*. The Siva myth and Shankar's tale are simultaneously told in contemporary fiction and undergirded by a common philosophy of renunciation, a pivotal principle in Hindu and Jain thought. They echo the story of renunciation of Ashok, the Jain monk in Mehta's novel. These two tales of Siva and Shankar signpost the myth of creation of the River Narmada from Lord Siva's meditative energies, which are evident in Jain ideals of asceticism and giving up worldly pleasures. In the myth of the Narmada's creation, Siva's intense meditation gives rise to beads of sweat. The sweat, in turn, is transformed into a rivulet, which becomes a turbulent torrent—the river goddess Narmada. What is striking is Mehta's strategic placement of the story of the Jain monk's renunciation that is used as a curtain raiser to the six compelling narratives. The Jain faith's name derives from the word *Jina*, meaning conqueror or liberator. And as Pratapaditya Pal states in *The Peaceful*

Liberators: "Jains believe that an immortal and indestructible soul (*jiva*) resides within every living entity, no matter how small. Passions such as desire, greed, and hatred render the soul vulnerable to the effects of former deeds (*karma*), which cause the soul to suffer from repeated rebirth…" Pal posits that the "final goal of a Jain—like that of a Hindu or Buddhist—is to sever the chain of rebirth and achieve a state of liberation known as *kaivalya*, *moksha*, or *nirvana*." Some members of the Jain faith, as well as Buddhists and Hindus, become homeless wanderers in search of truth and liberation. Such people are known as *sramanas*, and their tradition *sramanical*.

In her choice of the Jain monk's story and its juxtaposition with the story of the Muslim boy Imrat and the Hindu teacher Master Mohan, Mehta signposts the heterogeneity of the Narmada which is a pilgrimage centre, not just for followers of the Hindu god Siva but also those of other faiths. In this way, Mehta represents the river as possessing a multiplicity of identities, and affording the river a certain intermediacy, in-between-ness and interchangeability, that challenges any purist reading of these stories. All the tales echo the running theme of pilgrimage on the banks of the Narmada, and each narrative underscores the importance of this river as a centre for pilgrims of many faiths. As Phyllis Granoff points out:

> The medieval Jain ritual of pilgrimage did not develop in a vacuum. It clearly reflects religious preoccupations that we might call pan-Indian, for we find similar tendencies in Hinduism and Buddhism.[28]

The reader is induced almost immediately into realising the importance of celibacy for the male aspiring to achieve spiritual power. In the passages that trace Ashok's evolution from playboy to priesthood, the reader is confronted by stringent rituals, even violent scenes of horror as in the plucking out the hair from his head in the initiation ceremony into monkhood. The monk relates the essence of his vow

to the Narrator:

> You will be deprived of the ministrations of any woman lest she arouse your desire.[29]

Only austere asceticism and shunning of sexual desire, domination, and pleasure of women would allow the Jain monk to possess new powers. In order to gain spiritual powers, the Jain monk, like the *Naga* ascetic, would have to give up the "ownership" of women. Mehta's account reiterates Klaus Theweleit's theory that in order to be free of the fear of feminine domination, men must first relinquish the desire to possess and dominate women.[30] Mehta fictionalises the *diksha*, or ritual, of renouncing the world in order to become a Jain monk in the first story about the Palanpuri Gujarati monk Ashok.[31] According to James Laidlaw, this ceremony replicates the renunciation of the spiritual leader of the Jains, Mahavira, who "took a year to give away his vast wealth (*varshi dan*) before renouncing".[32] Laidlaw explains the *diksha* ceremony:

> Mr. Atul Kumar Shah, a twenty-nine year-old bachelor and a diamond merchant based in Bombay, renounced his very considerable fortune to become a monk of the *Tapa Gacch* order. According to newspaper reports of this event, Mr. Shah rode in a chariot in a procession of seven elephants, fifty horses, forty camels, and hundreds of dancers and acrobats, and threw handfuls of silver coins, diamonds, and pearls into the crowd,

just as Mehta's unnamed Narrator does, in his recounting of the Jain monk Ashok's induction into abstinence and asceticism.

The story of the Jain monk Ashok underpins the main *sutra*, or thread, of the male fear of being dominated by woman's sexual powers, weaving all the stories into a seamless tapestry of tellings. It also

mirrors the influence of the sacred myth of Lord Siva's asceticism—and the immaculate conception of his beautiful daughter the river goddess Narmada—on the lives of monks, bounty hunters, pilgrims, retirees, archaeologists, ascetics, prostitutes, doctors, hustlers, and tribals who inhabit the banks of the long and winding Narmada. Ashok, the virile diamond merchant turned celibate Digambara[33] ascetic, admits to his earlier need to dominate women in his youth in order to feel empowered:

> For a while it seemed my father had calculated accurately. Knowing my years of pleasure in Europe were limited I had seized on my irresponsible life with hectic delight. Beautiful women were lured by my fast sports cars, the wealth I squandered in fashionable discotheques, and by myself—for I was thought to be handsome with my aquiline features and my slender, muscular body. Then too, the family maintained luxurious holiday homes and I was generous with my invitations.[34]

In his conversation with the novel's nameless Narrator, the monk further confesses an impulse to "own" his women:

> If the indolent starlets from the film studios of Bombay, the ambitious secretaries from the European diamond companies, the bored girls who haunted the discotheques, sometimes felt I used a little too much force in our love-making, they soon laughed it off when they received my lavish presents, even boasting to their friends that I suffered from an excess of virility.[35]

Later, of course, he realises the truth after an elderly Jain monk instructs him about sexual and fiscal appetites, and the great Jain saint Mahavira's philosophy: that men "long to be free," but, "Many men die before they learn the desire for freedom lies deep within them, like

a dammed river waiting to be released. But once a man has had that momentary glimpse of freedom he needs to be instructed further."[36]

THE RIVER AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS BETWEEN HINDUISM, ISLAM, AND JAINISM

Mehta's melding of Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam in her multi-narrative, multi-genre work reflects the fluidity of the river itself. Mehta uses poetry, religious invocations, journals, letters, and the oral tradition of storytelling to construct her narrative. And her stories are all punctuated by multiple manifestations of the divine from several religions. Thus, Tariq Mia's account of the young, dispossessed Imrat's murder at the hands of the landed gentry, is narrated through the eyes of a Muslim cleric; the reformed playboy-turned- monk's story is told within the principles of Jainism; tea plantation manager Nitin Bose's story of offering prayers and performing penance to the Narmada for his mistreatment of the tealeaf picker Rima, is anchored in animistic beliefs; and archaeologist-turned-*Naga*-ascetic-turned archaeologist Shankar and his "adopted daughter" Uma's story is grounded in the Hindu myth of Siva and Narmada. Mehta's approach reflects her oft-stated idea of a tolerant, all-embracing India, not unlike the "universal" India of Tagore's imagined nation where he upholds a hybridised template of a modern India. In "*Hey mor chitto*" (Oh, My Soul), Tagore invokes the pre-colonial, hybridised concept of the "Nation" that he wanted the "new" India to represent, where all religions would co-exist in harmony:

> No-one knows from where it flows or
> who set in motion,
> this wild flood-force of Humanity's course, to
> mingle in mid-ocean.
> Here are Aryans and non-Aryans,
> Moguls, tribes-of-East,

> and Huns and Scythians, Pathans, Dravidians,
> all in a body pieced.
> Now the West has opened its door—
> and bringing gifts all through it they pour, To
> give, to take, their mixed mixing make... their
> way they will not retrace,
> where India's greatness reigns, before the
> ocean's space.[37]

Mehta's account is embedded with the magical qualities of the divine, not unlike the way Ngugi waThiong'o presents the Honia River in *The River Between*: "A river flowed through the valley of life... The river was called Honia, which meant cure or bring- back-to-life".[38] Trevor James argues that the Honia River has, "what we might call divine functions, it is seen as the creator and giver of life, the ground of the soul, the source of what is common to all. In ritual terms, the river is the place of cleansing, initiation and baptism".[39]

I argue that *A River Sutra* draws on the divine feminine embedded in the sacrality of the myth of the Narmada—which is inextricably yoked to the phallocentric creation myths of the ascetic-erotic male deity Siva. Drawing on these myths, Gita Mehta's representations of the feminine as sexually empowered and self-reliant converge with contemporary Western theorists. Klaus Theweleit, Angela Grooten, Maja Pelikaan-Engel, and Lynda Nead have explained how myths of sexuality and male fantasies perpetuate patriarchal desire to possess and rule, often "robbing the feminine of both metaphorical and even morphological agency".[40]

This chapter also demonstrates how Mehta, in her attempt to blur the lines between the profane and the sacred landscape, confronts the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. Mehta inserts the unstable Hindu myth of the Narmada into the vexed, subversive battlefield of post-imperial identity, where wounded civilisations

of the Muslims and Hindus find confluence. Thus she situates her narratives within the expedient politics of divide-and-rule practiced by India's British rulers, and a reality of ruthless and unethical governance in postcolonial India. There is a religious plurality that runs through *A River Sutra* with a nameless Hindu acting as the principal Narrator, and a Muslim cleric Tariq Mia playing the role of secondary Narrator. What was Mehta's intention in locating a Muslim narrative on the banks of one of the most sacred rivers of the Hindus? Was it Mehta's imaginary of a cohesive India, or is there a reality that informs her idea of a cohabiting of multi-religious elements in India? In an interview, Mehta explained the influence of religion on her:

> I come from a multicultural, multi-religious background. My mother's side of the family was from Kashmir and could read the *Bhagavad Gita* in Persian. They resided in Lahore (in undivided India) and even though they were Hindu girls, they would go out during the *Moharram* and give *sherbet* (cold drinks) to the Muslim *Tazia* carriers. I married a Sikh and we never thought of us being different in India as Sikhs and Hindus. Politicians in India create religious rifts.
>
> Look at the Ayodhya issue. I feel like saying, 'I own that soil too' when they kill themselves over temple and mosque. Rabindranath Tagore called it 'sacred geography.' It's a sorry comment on our heritage when the very seduction of our civilisation, which is the massive philosophical leaps of imagination we took at any point in time of our history, has got lost in the politicising of religion.[41]

A River Sutra shows that it is possible to reconstruct an identity of what it means to be an "Indian" from a fractured, violent neocolonial present where Hindus and Muslims are in conflict. It is possible to do so by looking past the fractured present toward a glorious

past that some scholars consider "the golden years of harmonious coexistence when the Sufi saints with their poetry and song captured the imagination of the common people."[42]

It is no accident that it is Tariq Mia, a Muslim Sufi poet and teacher with a deep and abiding friendship with the Hindu Narrator of the novel, who introduces the river goddess Narmada's mysteries to the reader at the outset. On the secular bank of the river, Tariq Mia reveals *Bhakti* philosophy: "The human heart has only one secret: the capacity to love".[43] The scholar Ashis Nandy posits that in India there are 116 communities that are both Hindu and Christian, and at least 35 communities that are both Hindu and Muslim.[44] He argues that these communities "define their Hinduism or Islam or Christianity in such as way that the symbols of sacredness of another faith acquire specific theological, cultural and familial status." Further, Nandy's argument about the need to protect less familiar faiths such as animism and indigenous cults strongly supports Mehta's project of empowering animisms practiced by Van tribals giving them voice and agency. Nandy fears that "South Asia will be poorer if its rich, intricate tapestry of faiths gets destroyed through neglect or shrinks into six or seven standard, mutually exclusive faiths because, in the contemporary world, only such standard faiths enjoy respectability and political clout." The result will be "a modern tragedy" that will "simultaneously impoverish Hinduism, Islam and the other South Asian faiths".[45]

Mehta signposts the inextricable ties that bind Muslims and Hindus with India's complex history by employing and reinventing the memory and language of the sixteenth-century mystics, and representing them in diverse forms, in every story in the novel:

> Some seek God in Mecca,
> Some seek God in Benares,
> Each finds his own path and the focus
> of his worship.

Some worship him in Mecca,
Some in Benares,
But I centre my worship on the eyebrow
of my beloved.

—Imrat, singing a hymn by the mystic Sufi saint, Kabir.[46]

Mehta's liberal use of the poetry of the Sufis—who suffered persecution under some Mughal emperors of India—is more than a tool for embellishment and aesthetics.[47] It is significant that Mehta prefaces the novel with a couplet from the poet-mystic Chandidas:

Listen, O Brother.
Man is the greatest Truth.
Nothing beyond.[48]

It reverberates through the novel in many forms, through the words of many characters. The refrain from Kabir, the Sufi mystic, punctuates the tale of the blind young singer Imrat:

O servant, where do you seek Me?
You will not find me in temple or mosque,
In Kaaba or in Kailash,
In yoga or renunciation.
Sings Kabir, "O seeker find God in the breath of all breathing."

—Imrat reciting a Kabir hymn.[49]

A River Sutra provides the reader with rare and hypnotic lyricism through the conjugation of oral and written traditions embedded in the cacophonous storytelling techniques that quite clearly resonate with the gentle and thunderous flow of the River Narmada. The reader is exposed to the recurring theme of the power of human

emotion over barriers of hate and destruction through enchanting stories of overwhelming pain and mysterious joy that unravel like the river's own journey. Like the divine feminine that is the River Narmada, Rima, the Vano tribal woman and the wandering minstrel Uma, signpost the importance of salvaging lost traditions of multiple religious heritages, and their potential to serve as a compass to find new identities among different religious communities that continue to cause communal strife in India.

NOTES

1 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 8.
2 Mehta, A River Sutra 259. The invocations to the goddess Narmada in *A River Sutra* are from the *Narmada Ashtakam*, composed as a stuti (hymn of praise) by Hindu philosopher, mystic and poet Adi Sankaracharya (788-821CE). Gita Mehta confirmed in a telephone conversation as well as an email exchange with the author on 25 May 2010 that the many invocations to the river goddess in her novel are from Sankaracharya's *Narmada Ashtakam.* I have referred to Sankaracharya's works in two different collections: *Sri Sankara Granthavali: Complete Works of Sri Sankaracarya* in the original Sanskrit, v. 1-10, revised ed. (Madras: Samata Books, 1998), originally published by Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1910. And also *Sankaracarya Granthamala,* v. 1-4 (Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandira, 1995).
3 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143.
4 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 254.
5 In the Sanskritic tradition, the *sutradhar* (*sutra*: thread; *dhar*: one who holds), like the chorus in Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedies, is a narrator of events, a commentator on characters and one who holds the plot together.
6 Coupe, *Myth* 139.
7 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 145.
8 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143.
9 See, Geoffrey Waring Maw, *Narmada: The Life of a River,* ed. Marjorie Sykes (Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh: Distributor, Friends Rural Centre, 1991) 3. Geoffrey Maw was an English Quaker who spent nearly forty years (1910-1949) working in the Hoshangabad district in Central India, on the South bank of the Narmada River. In this compelling travelogue Maw maintains: "In the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* the river has another name. She is Rewa 'the

leaping one'...she dances down her rocky bed in countless rapids and waterfalls. She is holy throughout her course, whether inhabited or uninhabited."

10 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 145.

11 See, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000). *A River Sutra* follows Frye's idea of the metamode. For Frye, romance is the metamode of all literature. Halfway between myth (the abstract forms of an ideal world underlying all literature) and realism (the concrete necessities of life in the real world), stands romance—a genre where magic can happen. The stories of the immortal Aryan warrior, Rima and Nitin Bose, and the courtesan and the bandit, are built on this model.

12 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania P, 1971) 67.

13 See, Dipankar Gupta, *Culture, Space, and the Nation-State: From Sentiment to Structure* (New Delhi and London: Sage, 2000). 175

14 See, Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996).

15 Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," *Early Theological Writings.*

16 Pepper, S. C. (1942). *World hypotheses: A study in evidence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pages 151-185)

17 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska P, 1984)

18 Arundhati Roy, Interview with Julie Mehta, Feb. 1998.

19 Amitav Ghosh, Interview with Julie Mehta, *The Nation,* Bangkok, Feb. 1998. See, Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadowlines* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

20 Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

21 Gita Mehta, personal interview, Nov. 2004. When asked about where she sourced her stories, Mehta said: "I read the autobiography of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. At one point he had to make twenty films a year to survive. There is an image in his book about how he used to close his eyes to recollect his earliest impressions. That stuck with me. I literally closed my eyes and tried to recall my earliest memories, stories my aunts and mother used to recount about the Hindu myths; incidents that occurred with people I knew when I was young, strange stories I heard from friends. And they unfolded in front of me."

22 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 176.

23 See, Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, C. Gordon, et al, ed. (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1980) 78-108.

24 Foucault, "Two Lectures." Foucault refers to the boat as a place of heterotopia 'parexcellence,' because it is already afloat on a heterotopic space like water which is a repository of many movements and peoples and becomes a heterotopic space

itself, by virtue of its phenomenology of fluidity and mobility.

25 The Narmada is 1,250 km long, with its source in Madhya Pradesh, central India, and flows west between the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges through Gujarat state to the Gulf of Khambat. Because the river is turbulent and confined between steep banks, it is unsuitable for navigation or irrigation. The Narmada, sacred to Hindus, is said to have sprung from the body of the god Siva. Hindus aspire to perform *parikrama*, or a round-trip pilgrimage on foot along its entire length.Many holy baths and sites line its banks; at Marble Gorge, whose 100-foot-high (30.5 metre) walls bear inscriptions and sculptures, is a twelfth century temple dedicated to Siva.

26 See Diana Eck, "India's *Tirthas:* 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," *History of Religions* 20.4 (May 1981): 323-344. Eck, a scholar of Comparative Religions at Harvard University, argues that Siva manifested himself on earth twelve times as a shattering sheath of light, known as *jyotirlinga*, which are sacred crossing places of the gods, and have become the preeminent destinations for Hindu pilgrims. The temples along the Narmada are especially sacred for their link with Siva's powerful manifestations. Temple towns of Amarkantak, Mahadeo and Rudra are on the route traversed by pilgrims, and form the geographical epicenter of *A River Sutra*.

27 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History.*

28 Phyllis Granoff, "Jain Pilgrimage: In Memory and Celebration of the Jinas," *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India,* ed. Pratapaditya Pal (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994) 63-65.

29 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 36

30 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*.

31 James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society Among the Jains* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 343.

32 James Laidlaw, *The Times of India*, 2 June 1991.

33 See, Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*, 15. Pal explains that *Digambaras* (sky-clad) are one of two original orders of monks the other was *Svetambara* (white-clad) who believe any possessions are a hindrance to achieving liberation because possessions foster attachment. Pal points out that *Digambaras,* like Ashok, "do not wear a stitch of clothing."

34 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 26

35 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 26-27.

36 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 29.

37 See, William Radice, ed. and trans., *Rabindranath Tagore, Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985); and Julie Mehta, "Tagore's Global Soul: In Flight between Nationalism and Liberalism," *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon,* ed. Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati University Press, 2009) 71. The fifteenth piece in the "Swadesh Parba" ("Nation" section of *Gitabitan*, the songbook that took the

popular imagination by storm during the Swadeshi (Independence) movement), and was an oft-quoted piece during the last century.

38 Ngugi waThiong'o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965) 1.
39 Trevor James, "Theology of Landscape and Ngugi waThiong'o's *The River Between," Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures,* 228.
40 Angela Grooten, "A Futile Controversy: Postmodernism and Feminism: United in Difference," *Against Patriarchal Thinking: A Future Without Discrimination*, ed. Maja Pellikaan-Engel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992) 186-187.
41 Gita Mehta, Interview with Julie Mehta, Apr. 2005. Gita Mehta explained: "We are the only country in the world where religious plurality is part of our birthright. *Bada din* (Christmas), *Id, Mahavir Jayanti, Buddha Jayanti, Diwali*—we celebrate as a nation and it's built into our genetic frame. We seem to forget that it is an obscenity to homogenise, to quote W.H. Auden. The Mughals came to India, but we absorbed them. They couldn't take us. Sure there was an Aurangzeb, but there was also a Dara Shikoh. We throw away the huge embarrassment of riches that is our great civilisation. We forget that it's our ability to embrace that has made us the great civilisation that we are. It's the greatest gift we have. Our history is very complex: Emperor Ashoka's mother was an untouchable. We have the caste system, true. But India's Constitution was written by an untouchable, Ambedkar. We are a civilisation that lives in the midst of mythology and history."
42 Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969) 178-185.
43 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 45.
44 Nandy, *Time Warps* 143-144.
45 Nandy, *Time Warps* 145.
46 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 70.
47 Carl W. Ernst, "Persecution and Circumspection in Shattari Sufism," *Islamic Sufism Contested:Thirteen Centuries of Debate and Conflict,* ed. Fred de Jong, et al (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999).
48 See, Deben Bhattacharya, trans., *Love Songs of Chandidas: The Rebel Poet-Priest of Bengal* (New York: Grove, 1970).
49 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 69.
https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pc/ch02.htm

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The Woman Fights Back : Regaining Control over the Self and the Body

Ananya Ghosh

David Michael Buss, the American evolutionary psychologist states that "the observable differences between males and females derive from different anatomical organization, which makes us different as men and women, and those anatomical differences are the origin of gender inequality."[1]

Margaret Mead refuses to accept the idea of gender construction being determined by the sex construction of the body. She asserts that the concept of masculinity and femininity are culturally and socially conditioned. She subverts the traditional binary gender differences stated by the arguments of biological determinism. According to her, gender roles are culturally conditioned. There are socially accepted ways to perform like a man or a woman. Society always prescribes certain roles for both the male and the female. This imposition of gender roles deliberately makes a woman assume a subjugated position in a society as compared to a man. The feminist icon Simone de Beauvoir articulates, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine."[2]

Throughout ages, there has been this ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman's existence. Sarah Moore Grimke, widely regarded as the mother of the women's suffrage movement, remarks :

> All history attests that man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means of selfish gratification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort;

> but never has desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill.[3]

The sufferings of women are not considered to be "wrong" acts but the part and parcel of everyday life. Moreover, women do not have any authority over their own body and existence. It is the superior male figure who is supposed to own and control the female body, as normalized by patriarchal strictures.

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), one of the most eminent literary figures, brings to us stories that speak of the minor details of women's lives, their suffering and endurance. Her writings offer a panorama of women's position in society as well as the politics of their body in a society shaped by patriarchal mandates. Most importantly, Devi's stories subvert gender roles and also capture the multiple layers of domination and resistance. Mahasweta Devi says, "I have always tried to explore people's version of history . . . In all my writings, I've tried to present the subaltern point of view."[4] Of particular interest to her is the plight of tribals, especially tribal women. A writer and social activist G.N. Devy stated, "Her writing addressed one single word: injustice".[5]

As Vandana writes,

> Mahasweta's fiction aims at inverting hegemonic, over-privileged, ever-signifying system of relationships and attempts to bring low what was high through the strategies of subversion and reversal. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures, generating aesthetics of opposition in the process.[6]

Every woman does not have the same fate: but they have similar experiences in different atmospheres. This is something Devi meticulously captures in her stories. Her short stories such as

"Breast-Giver", "Draupadi" from *In Other Worlds* (1987), "Dhouli", "Shanichari", "Chinta" from *Outcast: Four Stories* (2002), "Giribala", "Ma from Dusk to Dawn" and "Sindhubala" from *In the Name of the Mother* (2011), demonstrate the paradoxical position and representation of women in society. Devi's stories are narratives of the unspoken misery of the marginalized women in society. Mahasweta Devi has travelled to remote tribal villages of India and has witnessed the trials and tribulations of these indigenous masses. She chooses as her characters tribal women who are subjugated in terms of class and gender. M.N. Chatterjee opines,

> Women, according to [Devi], are much stronger than men. But, in the poorer class their sufferings multiply not only because of their belonging to this class but also because of their bodies. They thus suffer double oppression. No wonder, the most common stories of victimization revolve round their falling a prey to the male lust.[7]

The story of 'Dhouli' gives a lucid account of the politics of caste and gender in a tribal society. Dhouli is a docile village girl who is a victim of child marriage and domestic violence. She becomes a widow at a very early age. A woman losing her husband at an early age is tagged as an ill omen and is herself considered responsible for her husband's death. Society will never allow her to remarry even if she wishes to, but the men around her will try to take advantage of the woman. Misrilal, an upper caste brahman falls in love with Dhouli, and secretly establishes physical relations with her. Dhouli reciprocates his love and becomes pregnant with Misrilal's child in the course of time. When Misrilal's mother gets to know about this, she immediately condemns Dhouli and not her own son. "…it is always the fault of the woman for not considering a brahman's honour. She is even more to blame".[8]

It is the woman who is always deemed to be the one who has

sinned. Men are not even considered guilty, let alone punished. Due to class difference and family pressures, Misrilal does not accept Dhouli as his wife nor does he take responsibility for the child. He marries another woman and settles in Ranchi. Dhouli is left all alone and is even asked to abort her child. But she decides to give birth to her child and raise it herself. The village people look down upon her and do not even dare to provide her with a job since it might offend their deota. Besides, the men in the village make obscene gestures in front of her and try to molest her. Dhouli realizes "this was her fate".[9] With no other option left and her family starving to death, Dhouli finally chooses prostitution as her livelihood.

"Whoever is ready to pay can come in".[10]

She becomes a rebel and turns against that very society which tried to suppress her in every possible way. It is the same society that forced her to opt for prostitution that also condemns her prostitution as offensive. It is men who would like to secretly gratify their desires through her body, but will censure her earning money by selling her own body. Dhouli's choice makes her a rebel against the hegemonic male society. She breaks the social taboo and starts attaining betterment in life.

The ethically and morally upright community at Taharr normalizes the sexual exploitation of *dusad* women by upper caste deotas. Those women who passively accept their tragic fate are patronized and those who dare to transgress the social mandates are subject to exploitation. Jhalo in this story does not resist the exploitation of her body, and thereby safeguards herself through her passivity. But Dhouli will not let men simply lay claim over her body to fulfil their lascivious wants. She refuses to be subjugated by men, breaks social taboos and proclaims her body as a site of individual self-determination. Therefore she is ousted from society:

> Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. [...] Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village.

> This village still has brahmans living in it. Puja is still done in their homes every day.[11]

Finally, Dhouli is threatened and forced to leave the village and practice her profession in some other town. The only choice she is given is to be a concubine to Misrilal's brother-in-law Kundan, which she declines. With Kundan "she would have been a randi in her private life."[12] She would have had a confined life and would have been forced to exist as the commodity of a man. But Dhouli makes a bold move:

> But now she was about to become a professional randi. When you are a kept woman, you're all alone. But now she would be a part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than [an] individual's strength. And those who had forced her to be a whore were the ones who controlled the society. They were the most powerful![13]

Dhouli wilfully inserts into public and economic domain her body, over which patriarchy had tried to establish personal claim. Her leaving for Ranchi is an example of the consequences that a woman has to face for going against the constraints of patriarchy. Although Dhouli defies subjugation, stands up for herself, refuses to remain as a kept woman of upper-caste men, yet she is exiled from her native village, and this is a partial defeat for her. Her banishment is definitely a blessing as she finally gets the liberty to lead her life on her own terms, but it is also an instance which proves that a woman going against the brutal social structures will always be treated as an outcast to society. 'Dhouli' has much in common with another story by Devi, named 'The Witch'. In this, a physically and mentally challenged girl named Somri is molested and subsequently demonized as a "daini" or witch by thakurs of Taharr, and forced to flee the village. This illustrates the silencing of the woman's voice, her

subordination and commodification within the patriarchal domains. Not only is the woman's body exploited, but that contaminated body is exiled and chased away out of society's boundaries.

Dhouli becomes a metaphor of the female body as a site for the imposition of hegemonic and exploitative politics of patriarchy. Rekha, a critic of Mahasweta Devi's stories, rightly says, "Though premised on the commodification of the body, her entering the professional market is an empowering act—an act where she becomes the master of her own body."[14]

Mahasweta Devi's 'The Hunt', revolves around the girl Mary Oraon, who is an illegitimate child of an Oraon tribal called Bhikni and her Australian master, Dixon's son. Such birth history makes her both an insider and an outsider within the Oraon community. Mary lives a well-to-do life and makes independent decisions for herself. But the exploitative capitalistic-feudal mainstream symbolized by the Tehsildar-Banwari nexus, targets Mary. Mary tries to resist the "erotic gaze" of Tehsildar Singh, and even threatens him with violence, but Tehsildar is an influential man. "Tehsildar has a lot of money, a lot of men. A city bastard."[15] He disregards Mary's warning and seeks opportunity to lay hands on her. Finally, Mary makes a daring move and utilises the cultural resources at hand to resist the "male gaze" and the objectification of her body. She tactically transfigures the ancient tribal ritual, *Jani Parab* into a tool of resistance to fight her potential rapist.

From the beginning of the story, Mary is a subversive character, who constantly involves herself in activities which are exclusively performed by males. She "pastures the Prasad's cattle. She is the most capable cowherd. She also sells custard apple and guava from Prasad's orchards, driving terrifically hard bargains with the Kunjaras, the wholesale fruit buyers. She takes the train to Tohri with vegetables from the field."[16] At the same time, she does take care of household chores. Therefore, her capacity to perform works of both male and female spheres challenges the biological and socio-cultural

demarcations of polarized gender identities.

In the story, the tradition of the hunting festival in the tribal village is a demonstration of hegemonic gender roles. Women are meant to stay in their houses and take care of the indoor chores, while men are entitled to earning money, hunting, and similar outdoor activities. Men "have been playing the hunt for a thousand million moons on this day."[17] This represents a hierarchical relationship between the predator and the prey; the man being the predator has the capacity to dominate. On a symbolic level, this hunting festival becomes a metaphor for the domination and subjugation of women by men; in this case, Mary, was about to be sexually exploited by Tehsildar. But Devi strategically employs this tribal ritual to transgress this gendered power play. She says,

> It is revealed that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn. It's Jani Parab. Like men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do. One in twelve years.[18]

In this story, Mahasweta Devi subverts the gender stereotypes which associate qualities such as strength, power and domination with men only. Women are in no way less than men, and they too are capable of all kinds of activities.

Mary's need for self-protection makes her as powerful as a man in a chauvinistic society. Mary's machete becomes the source of her power, a substitution for her lack of the "male phallus". The machete provides her security and helps her defend herself in adverse conditions. When men "had wanted to be her lover, Mary had lifted her machete."[19] At one point she said : "brokers like you, with tight

pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go and ask if you don't believe me."[20] And finally, with that very machete she kills Tehsildar in the hunt.

Mahasweta Devi revolutionizes the tribal ritual into both a cultural trope for gender empowerment and a tool of resistance. The ritualistic description of the episode of killing a beast/demon sanctifies the violence inherent in it into a legitimate act, and celebrates the latent feminine energy.

> Mary caresses Tehsildar's face [...]. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes becomes an animal—Now take me? Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing. Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers. [...] Mary stands up. Blood? On her clothes? She'll wash in the cut. [...] Mary comes out. Walks naked to the cut. Bathing naked in the cut her face fills with deep satisfaction. [...] In the women's gathering Mary drank the most wine, sang, and danced [...] with the greatest relish. [...] as if she had made the biggest kill.[21]

The all-powerful woman hunts down her potential rapist and kills him—a subversion of established gender roles.

The dominant feminist discourses of the late twentieth century focus on the idea of the female body being a socially constructed entity. Feminists consider "that imagination of the female body was a socially shaped and historically 'colonized' territory, not a site of individual self-determination."[22] Mahasweta Devi's stories put emphasis on this issue. But Devi also explores the ambiguity of the female body—a site of exploitation that can turn into a site of resistance. Devi articulates the unwritten histories of tribal, subaltern women and also envisages alternative tactics to fight oppression.

All these marginalized women do exercise power but within a constricted space. Long term sufferings and repression of the

female individual have finally led to the eruption of this power. But patriarchy has always tried to sabotage this power and damage it like her identity and body. Yet these women refuse to accept defeat; they do stand up for their own selves and vehemently try to assert their own individuality.

While Mahasweta Devi was delineating the struggles of the tribal women in India, Bessie Head (1937-1986), a contemporary of Devi, was working on the lives of women in the villages of Botswana in Africa. A writer of novels, short fictions and autobiographical works, she is one of the most influential writers of Africa. Head's writings deal at great length with the problems of third world women—the rural women of Botswana. Although she refutes the label of feminist, yet Head's stories demonstrate her acute observation of women's struggles in society, their experiences and fates. Through her writings Head situates herself in a position from where she delves deep into the mind of the African woman.

Bessie Head holds history responsible for the position of women in society:

> The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life.[23]

Susan Gardner traces "a discernible feminist content" in Bessie Head's collection because it centres on "the insistence that women have suffered systematic social injustice because of their sex."[24]

Psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism considers the phallus as the metaphor and source of power, which leads to the building up of a phallocentric society. For Lacan, this "phallus" does not merely refer to the penis; it also a metaphor for the male dominance in society. Since women lack the phallus, so they are also lacking in worldly authority and self-possession. Hence, it accounts for the

subjugated position that women experience in society.

Head's major characters are women who fight to establish a kind of equality with men, as for example, Maria, Paulina and the prostitutes in "When Rain Clouds Gather", Margaret and Dikeledi in "Maru", Elizabeth in "A Question of Power" and, Life and Dikeledi in her short stories.

The "The Collector of Treasures", the title story of Bessie Head's collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) is read as a de(con)struction of phallocratic society. The story is set in post-colonial Botswana and revolves around the life of Dikeledi Mokopi and her estranged husband Garesego Mokopi. Garesego has left his wife and children in his pursuit of other women for sexual gratification. As a result, Dikeledi alone has to bring up her three children. However, when Garesego returns with intentions of having sexual intercourse with her, Dikeledi cuts off his genitals with a kitchen knife. Subsequently, she receives life imprisonment. In prison, she finds a few other women who have committed the same felony.

According to patriarchy, there is this constant lack in the lives of women because the latter do not possess the penis as a transcendental signifier of masculine superiority. In Bessie Head's story, Garegeso represents this phallocratic supremacy of men in society. The author labels him as "evil" and compares him to a dog who "imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it" (p. 91).[25]

Femi Ojo-Ade finds these kinds of men to be loathsome, for they "make babies like machines and turn their backs upon the poor women."[26] Indeed, the patriarchal society supposes that the sole function of women's body is to satiate the male sexual hunger and to produce offspring. Paglia regards "male lust and male aggression" as the "two uncontrollable forces of nature in society."[27] Garesego is an embodiment of sexual bestiality. He deserts his wife for a casual hunt for women and later returns when Dikeledi wants financial

help for their son's education. Planning on vengeance for the ill-treatment she received as a wife, Dikeledi castrates Garesego. This deed is an attempt by the subjugated woman to deconstruct the phallocentric society in which beastlike men dominate. Marius Crous affirms that "Garesego's anguished bellows are signifiers of his loss of phallic supremacy and the end of male rule . . . He is no longer the supreme representative of the Law-of-the-Father and the language of patriarchal dominance."[28]

In a discussion with Susan Gardner, Bessie Head said that this horrible deed of Dikeledi reveals "the deep psychological trauma the woman had lived with."[29] In response to this story, it is appropriate to quote Kim Master: "Men feel emasculated by the story while women feel empowered."[30]

But patriarchy exerts its control over Dikeledi by imprisoning her. There is a note of dissatisfaction at the end of the story, similar to that of the Ridley Scott directed movie "Thelma and Louise". The two women characters in the film have fought bravely against patriarchal dominance. Lousie kills the man who tries to rape Thelma. At the end of the film, they "commit suicide" to escape arrest by the police who would have refused to believe their story. Was their activity a failed attempt at emancipation? In this regard, Belling (1992: 49) states:

> What does one do with a female hero once she has discovered that her heroism is at odds with the social order that dictates happy endings? The monster killed by Thelma and Louise is a rapist, the rest of the film traces their exhilarating empowerment as outlaws, and the final freezeframe confirms that . . . no satisfactory resolution is available . . . Their liberation remains imaginary.[31]

Similarly, Dikeledi is once again subject to another form of coercion. The prison wall silences her revolutionary deed, and society turns a

deaf ear to the injustice meted out to her. This ending is an emblem of silencing the voices of women throughout the ages in narratives and reality, so on and so forth. The prison is a microcosm for a society that repudiates the courageous voice of the woman.

Dikeledi, named after her mother's tears, embodies the struggle of women who have a long way to go before the cycle of violence on women can be replaced by a spiral of peace. In prison, Dikeledi meets other women who too have killed their husbands. Those convicted husband-murderers are an exemplar of the fact that ages of injustice and oppression on women has left them no other choice but to resort to violence. Bessie Head most sharply and explicitly critiques the angst-ridden condition of women in society. Women are so exposed to suffering, abuse, rape and harassment that when they begin their backlash it comes about in various forms of aggression. So it is understandable as to why Dikeledi decided to punish her husband herself. The emotional shift from "assertion" to "aggression" is also accompanied by a power shift.

Bessie Head's "Life", revolves around a woman called Life who migrates from Johannesburg to a village in Botswana. She has tried various jobs in the city, among others prostitution. After returning to her village, Life starts earning money by selling her body. This astounds the village people. Most of the village women's love affairs very often ended tragically for them. Men used to abandon them after fulfilling their own sexual desires and the women were left alone with pre-marital pregnancies, fatherless children and shame. Life, on the other hand sticks to the carpe diem philosophy. Her motto is: "live fast, die young and have a good-looking corpse."[32] Life feels that she has the right to choose her life style. She is the only woman in the village who starts earning her living as a sex-worker. Life empowers herself by making men pay her for the services she is offering. It is no more the gratuitous sexual satisfaction that men can have simply by treating women as their possession. Men paying her for sex became victims of their own

weakness. "…They could get all the sex they needed for free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time."[33]

Power and leadership often remain as the domain of men. Lesego (one of the most respected and honoured men in the village) marries Life with the intention of maintaining order in a corrupted village by preventing Life from carrying on prostitution in the village. But Life is "a woman who had broken all the social taboos"; she enjoys life on her own terms and shows other women that they too are worth something to men. Life can never accept the fact that she is owned by a man, which is why she finds her married life suffocating. Because of this, she escapes back to the world of men, music, drink, beer, women, prostitution. But Lesego is a determined man who refuses to compromise. She must remain within the boundaries prescribed by Lesego or else be killed. Lesego says, "I thought that if she was doing a bad thing with Radithobolo as Mathata said, I better kill her because I cannot understand a wife who could be so corrupt."[34]

For killing Life, her husband is sentenced to an imprisonment of five years, whereas Dikeledi in "The Collector of Treasures" has a life sentence for killing a husband who once abandoned her—again a clear instance of sexist discrimination. Head demonstrates how women are exploited on the basis of their gender. She depicts how the court was not dealing with individual cases, but with women's inferiority. As a woman, Life too experienced gender oppression in her marriage. Lesego takes control of the money and Life is supposed to account for her expenses. This proves that being a woman she has no right to control economy. In "The Special One", another story in the same collection, a woman named Ms Maleboge is betrayed by her brothers and deprived of her inheritance. "I lost it," sighs Ms. Maleboge, "because women are just dogs in this society."[35] However, the same women who are subject to all kinds of subjugation can destroy men through their own dark powers. "Many women have killed men by

sleeping with them during that time,"[36] says Ms. Maleboge's friend, in reference to the period of menstruation.

After the impenetrable night of despair comes the great illuminating power of awakening. When women finally start to resist oppression and challenge patriarchy, they are dreaded by men. Men cannot accept the very idea of a woman being powerful or entering the domain controlled by men. This is the reason because of which society, especially a patriarchal society, very often associates powerful female figures to witches, demons or such socially constructed evil entities.

Bessie Head gives us various instances of women's resistance to male domination. Head is a committed writer, who rages against the exploitation of women and advocates for a balance and equality between women and men. She does not just advocate for women's rights but depicts her female characters as warriors in an essentially patriarchal society that strives to supress them in every possible way.

Mahasweta Devi and Bessie Head are two different writers of different origin and race, writing from two different continents. But both have observed the same experiences that women go through, be it in India or Africa, or any other country for that matter. Both Head and Devi are radical thinkers who have meticulously captured the exploitation of women at the hands of patriarchy. The plots of their fictions might be different, but they all converge at one point : the politics of the female body. Both have created female characters who assert control over their own self and body; they strategically turn their bodies from sites of exploitation to sites of resistance. Although considered weak and fragile, and robustly exploited on the basis of gender, these women have proved they have the potential to assert themselves as individuals capable of rebelling against the mandates of society. Both are stalwarts who have given voice to an entire race of women, and captured their experiences with startling precision and formidable insight.

As Cecily Lockett rightly puts it,

> The common denominator is the concept of gender: women are subject to control and the oppression on the basis of their gender. This is something that functions to unite women across divisions of race or religion; the common experience of oppression: based on gender identity.[37]

Patriarchy has always shaped mythologies where strong and empowered female figures like Hecate, Medea and Medusa are depicted as fearful and merciless creatures causing death and evil for men. In every man-made narrative, rebel women are categorized as evil-doers, or monsters. Associating strong women with negative images or ideas does not make them flawed. Rather these images of fear, death and other negative attributions make women more empowered. It is better to be dreaded for malignant qualities rather than remain "passive and subjugated". As S. Yumiko Hulvey formulates in her article "Myths and Monsters: The Female Body As The Site For Political Agendas" (2000): "[i]f women today cannot be revered or worshipped as the creators of life, they prefer to be feared as agents of death, as decreed by myth, rather than bow down meekly as the oppressed Other."[38]

A woman's patience should not be tested. Society might label her as fragile and vulnerable, but her latent energy can surface back any time to give a harsh strike to oppressors. The electrifying words of Ashapurna Devi, another significant figure of feminist literature, is noteworthy in this context:

> I always compare women to matchboxes. Why? Because the way matchboxes are—even though they have enough gunpowder to set a hundred 'Lankas' aflame, they sit around meek and innocent, in the kitchen, in the pantry, in the bedroom, here, there, anywhere—women, too, are exactly the same![39]

NOTES

1. David Michael Buss, quoted in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History,* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 7-16.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1988).
3. Sarah Grimke, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Conditions of Woman,* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970).
4. Mahasweta Devi, *The Queen of Jhansi,* trans. Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, (Kolkata: Seagull, 2000), 275
5. Ganesh N. Devy, "The Adivasi Mahasweta," *Mahasweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer,* (August 25, 2011), www.der.orgfilmsresourcesMahaswetaDeviStudyGuide.pdf.
6. Vandana, (2007) "Aesthetics of Activism: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Fiction," (2007), http://hdl.handle.net/10603/186613
7. M.N. Chatterjee, "Re-reading Mahasweta Devi," *Indian Literature* 52, no. 6, (2008): 240, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23348446
8. Mahasweta Devi, "Dhouli," *Outcast* trans. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002), 13.
9. Mahasweta Devi, "Dhouli," 27.
10. Mahasweta Devi, "Dhouli," 21.
11. Mahasweta Devi, "Dhouli," 31.
12. Mahasweta Devi, "Dhouli," 32.
13. Mahasweta Devi "Dhouli," 32.
14. Rekha, "The Poetics and Politics of Space: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Subaltern Stories," *Indian Literature* 54, no. 6, (2010): 151, http://www.jstor.com/stable/23348277
15. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," *Imaginary Maps. Three stories by Mahasweta Devi*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 12-13.
16. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 2.
17. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 12.
18. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 12.
19. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 3.
20. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 10.
21. Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," 16.
22. Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body," *Feminist Theory and the Body. A Reader,* ed. J. Price and M. Shildrick, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 251.
23. Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*, (London: Heinemann, 1986), 92.
24. Susan Gardner, "Production under drought conditions," *Africa Insight* 15, no. 1, (1985): 45, https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA02562804_255

25 Bessie Head, "The Collector of Treasures," 91.
26 Femi Ojo-Ade, "Of human trials and triumphs: Bessie Head's collection of treasures," quoted in Cecil Abrahams, *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990).
27 Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture,* (London: Viking, 1993), 63.
28 Marius Crous, "Díkeledí's revenge: A Reading of Bessie Head's collector of treasures," *Literator* 17, no.1, (April, 1996): 138.
29 Bessie Head, interviewed by Susan Gardner, 1989.
30 Kim Masters, "Sex, Lies and an 8-inch carving knife," *Vanity Fair* 56, no.11, (1993): 118.
31 Catherine Belling, "Where meaning collapses: Alien and the outlawing of the female hero," *Literator* 13, no.3, (1992): 49.
32 Bessie Head, "Life," *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*, (London: Heinemann, 1992), 40.
33 Bessie Head, "Life," 40.
34 Bessie Head, "Life," 46.
35 . Bessie Head, "The Special One," *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*, (London: Heinemann, 1992), 81.
36 Bessie Head, "The Special One,"
37 Cecily Lockett, "Sisterhood/otherhood: The politics of contemporary feminism in South African literary studies". *AUETSA Conference Paper,* (1993): 330.
38 S. Yumiko Hulvey, "Myths and Monsters: The Female Body as the Site for Political Agendas," ed. Debra Walker King, *Body Politics and The Fictional Double,* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 88.
39 Ashapurna Debi, "Matchbox," *Matchbox: Stories by Ashapurna Debi*, trans. Prasenjit Gupta, (India: Hachette India, 2015).

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Nation, Memory, Voice: A Study of Gendered Narrative in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

DR. JASMINE A. CHOUDHURY

After achieving its independence in 1971, Bangladesh underwent the transformative effects of civil war in terms of postcolonial national identity, ethnicity, class, caste and religion. The historical circumstances produced significant "material and ideological changes that affected women,"[1] whose integration into the national struggles was different from that of the men. In this context, *A Golden Age* as a literary text sheds light on the "invisible" history and experiences of third world women in Bangladesh.

Since this study looks at gendered narratives and gender roles mediated by nationalism in the public and private spheres, concepts of femininity (motherhood and widowhood) and masculinity (in the national struggle), and the effects of migration and generational dynamics on national identity are of key importance. Concepts of collective memory and national identity remain significant to this analysis.

A GOLDEN AGE: PARTITION, MOTHERHOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

This study reads Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) as a gendered narrative of collective memory, arguing that gendered positioning in public and private domains, as well as the concepts of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh, played an essential and formative role in the construction of national identities.

Published over three decades after the foundation of Bangladesh in 1971, *A Golden Ag*e represents a woman's narrative of collective memory, which brings with it pertinent questions about the reproduction of national identity through events associated with the partition, women's ever changing roles in both public and private realms, motherhood, widowhood and sexuality during the struggle for independence. Based on the true story of Anam's grandmother, who experienced the war between West and East Pakistan, this novel provides a feminised perspective on national identity and domestic loss with historical and spatial distance. In the narrative, Rehana is described as a young Urdu-speaking Calcutta born widow who lives in the Bengali East in 1971.

East and West Pakistan in 1971

The novel starts with the startlingly blunt words of a widow: "Dear Husband, I lost our children today,"[2] and presents her desperation as she resigns to her fate "My children are no longer my children."[3] Young Rehana faces the tragedy of the death of her husband and her fight to keep her children, when her dead husband's brother and his childless wife claim they could take better care of them. The first chapter begins with that day in 1959 when the court gives custody to her brother-in-law and his wife, who live in Lahore, (West Pakistan) while Rehana is in Dhaka (East Pakistan). The novel then jumps forward and is set in 1971, in Dhaka, the year of its war of independence, when East separated from West Pakistan and became Bangladesh. Rehana's children, Maya and Sohail are now university students and living with their mother after she manages to get hold of some money without having to resort to remarriage for acquiring financial stability.

Despite her best efforts to protect her children, Rehana is unable to stop them from becoming involved in the events of the revolution. Representing the educated younger generation, Sohail and Maya actively contribute to the cause of independence of the Bengal East, and it is difficult to keep these matters hidden for long: "He's too busy with his politics—he'll never make a good husband…"[4] she hears Mrs Chowdhury say about Sohail. The comment stings because it is probably true. Her son Sohail joins a guerrilla group of freedom fighters and her daughter Maya goes to Calcutta to work in nearby refugee camps and write press releases.

> Lately the children had little time for anything but the struggle. It had started when Sohail entered the university. Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it on factories in Karachi and Islamabad.[5]

Rehana initially treats their political involvement with suspicion: "The Dhaka university students had been involved in the protests . . . Even Rehana could see the logic: what sense did it make to have a country in two halves, posed on either side of India like a pair of horns?"[6]

Although reluctant to support them first, Rehana soon finds herself enmeshed in the conflict—as a mother trying to protect her children. The shift in her thought process as well as her changing role as a woman who contributes to the war of independence is in sharp contrast to the idea of a masculinised collective identity and point toward the importance of private domestic space in the creation and reproduction of national identity.

Rather than be fearful of losing her children again, she supports them and their cause, finding herself on the opposite side of the conflict to her disapproving family who live in West Pakistan.

> Rehana wondered what her sisters would make of her at this very moment. Guerillas at Shona. Sewing kathas on the rooftop. Her daughter at rifle practice. The thought of their shocked faces made her want to laugh. She imagined the letter she would write. Dear sisters, she would say. Our countries are at war; yours and mine. We are on different sides now. I am making pickles for the war effort. You see how much I belong here and not to you.[7]

The conflict of national identity that Rehana experiences becomes clearer during the civil war between the two wings of Pakistan after the partition of India. In the novel, the simile of "a pair of horns"[8] on either side of India explicates the difficulty of separation, as well as the construction of a Bengali national identity. Rehana's national identity is shaped solely by her socio-cultural and gendered location within the national contexts of East and West Pakistan. She is a middle-class Muslim woman from Calcutta, and with her unconfirmed status as a Bengali woman speaking fluent Urdu—now the language of the

enemy—in East Pakistan, she holds an ambiguous status as far as traditional expectation in a divided nation is concerned. Throughout the narrative, one witnesses that concepts of femininity, such as widowhood and motherhood, are stressed upon, for they have a decisive impact upon Rehana's life as well as her role in the national resistance. As a widowed housewife, she had lost the custody of her children only to regain it after many years, and that too only when she is financially stable again.

In her struggle to find money, she even considers remarrying and faces risks of exposure to sexual harassment, something that she forcefully avoids. The patriarchal social structure and traditional gender roles, in this sense, are perpetuated through the family institution and restrict women's capacity to be active agents in society.[9] For Rehana, motherhood precedes all the other roles that she plays in her life, and this has a decisive role in her involuntary participation in the freedom movement. With her children's active participation in the movement, she becomes more interested in the political confusion and the destructive effects of war on her nation and family. Finally she gives in to her children's request to shelter refugees at Shona (their house), providing food and even going to the extent of hiding guerrillas there.

Thus, it becomes obvious how a private domestic space (Rehana's home, in this case) serves as a shelter for national resistance and leads to the creation of the national Bengali identity. Rehana's courage and support upgrades her position to that of a female "hero" who strives to protect her community against the outrage and take her place in the gendered narratives of collective memory. Developing the concept of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argued that individual memories are only understood within the context of a group, unifying the nation or community through time and space.[10] The individual memory (IM) comprises remembrances supported by individuals and reconstructed due to their interaction and determination with certain group(s). The remembrances would be constituted by experiences

lived by the individual himself, and the collective memory (CM), which comprises remembrances supported in a collectivity, is mostly the result of common IM.

The differential integration of women and men into the nationalist struggle of Bangladesh is also disclosed through men taking more active part in organising and joining the resistance than women: they are the warriors, while women are expected to do their bit in preserving national identity, to increase national awareness through media and communication, to assist men by working in refugee camps, and tending to the victims of the war or sheltering guerrillas in their houses. Kamila Shamsie observes: "One of the novel's great strengths is its decision to show war from the perspective of the women who cannot join the armed resistance and must instead find a way to live in the limbo world of a city in curfew."[11] On occasions, they even end up becoming victims of war because of their positioning as regards their gender and national identity. Sexual violence, or the fear of it, leads to the need for male protection. Maya's best friend, Sharmeen, dies in hospital after a sexual assault by enemy soldiers. On the night of the army occupation, Rehana's neighbour, Mrs. Chowdhury enforces an immediate marriage ceremony between her daughter Silvi and her fiancé Sabeer to save her daughter's "honor." Parveen, her brother-in-law's wife, on the other hand, (mis)uses her husband's position and political power to oppress Rehana and other women.

Anam balances the private history of a family against the public history of their nation. Never once does one lose sight of the upheaval of Dhaka in 1971, as she effortlessly weaves these stories into the personal lives of her characters. If one looks within the postcolonial and nationalist construct, women like Rehana have usually been identified as biological, symbolic and cultural "reproducers" of the nation, and these roles have substantially shaped women's obligations, rights and duties. In *Gender and Nation*, NiraYuval-Davis opines that constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions

of womanhood and manhood and masculinity and femininity as a way of determining gender-roles.[12] Talking about the nationalist or masculinist bias in gendering the nation, where women and their roles are pushed to the periphery, she says that it is "women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically."[13] Butler argues that gender is "a stylized repetition of acts" and is real only to the extent that it is performed. The fact is that one is not essentially one but one becomes one through his or her acts. Butler in this context gives the reference to the "drags" who by their everyday gender rituals and, through this repetition of gendered actions reveal that gender is a performance; "a constructed identity", "a performative accomplishment."[14] Gender, according to West and Zimmerman, is not a personal trait; it is "an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society."[15] As social construct, gender is considered an achieved status by feminist theory, typically (and not exclusively) one which is achieved very early in childhood (West and Zimmerman).

Thus, one sees that both gender and nation are constructs, and while gender is a social construct, nation, as Benedict Anderson famously argues, is an imagined political community. Homi K. Bhabha like many other thinkers, perhaps takes Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* (1991) as a starting point to think about nations. For him, nation is an idea; a discursive and cultural construct. It "is a system of cultural signification ... the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity."[16] These nations are "historically a male-constructed space"[17] and they commonly perpetuate a masculinised collective memory. The novel, however, radically represents "the differential integration of women and men into the national project."[18] It establishes the fact that the construction of national identity is essentially rooted in the family setting or private domestic space, which is often seen as having minimal impact on the public sphere, through which masculine interpretations of

nationalism define themselves.

In nationalist movements, the roles of women are frequently restricted to being only "contributive" in the public sphere, while men are considered "the main movers of history" because they "organize and set parameters for nationalist movements".[19] In this regard, *A Golden Age* draws attention to third world women's critical status and changing roles in public and private spheres through a family's experiences of nationalist struggle and controversial issues in Bangladesh (like those related to social, religious, linguistic and political matters). In the words of Anam:

> After having interviewed more than a hundred survivors of the Bangladesh War for Independence, I realised it was the very small details that always stayed in my mind—the guerilla fighters who exchanged shirts before they went into battle, the women who sewed their best silk saris into blankets for the refugees. I realised I wanted to write a novel about how ordinary people are transformed by war, and once I discovered this, I turned to the story of my maternal grandmother, Musleha Islam, and how she became a revolutionary.[20]

In *Feminism Without Borders,* Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that third world women do not share totally the same history with women from other areas of the world due to their "particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century-Euro-American-hegemony, the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration...colonialism, imperial conquest and genocide."[21] However, they are unified by their experience of oppression, their opposition to war and war like situations, and shared goals. Their political struggle is usually concerned with their participation in organised movements. Women in these states are linked to the nation in various roles: "as biological reproducer members of ethnic collectivities...the transmitters of culture, as signifiers of ethnic/national groups, and participants in

national, economic, political and military struggles."[22]

Although women appear to be the carriers of cultural values and traditions, and thus national identity, it would be wrong to assume that they can use these assigned roles on their own behalf. Freedom movement/ National struggle partially frees women from traditional restraints and allows them to take part in public and political spheres with men that were "disallowed under normal conditions"; yet, it also threatens their role as reproducers through religious, "communal, class and caste" hostilities like rape, forced pregnancy and torture.[23] Gendered parameters also style men as the "author and subject of the nation", whilst women represent the nation itself and are expected to maintain its "purity."[24]

The diasporic narrative of Anam investigates the issues of "the production of self and collective consciousness" by documenting "third world women's life histories."[25] Documenting such stories immensely helps communities sharing a particular history by preventing their collective consciousness from being lost. This also promises the "very possibilities of political consciousness and action" for females through telling their stories.[26] Rehana's story highlights the often forgotten experience of women in war and the price that they are willing to pay for their collective cause. Rehana must bear wounds in the deepest part of her soul to save her children. She does not flinch while giving up the man she has grown to love, to save her son and herself. This story goes on to show that while a women's role in war is different than that of a man's, women hardly come out untouched.

CONCLUSION

As a gendered narrative of national identity and collective memory, *A Golden Age* represents the transforming gender roles and understanding of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh. The novel demonstrates that national struggles, political conflicts, generational dynamics

and migrant experiences have contributed to the improvement of women's status and roles on the public, private and national levels. Despite being challenged by set gender roles which were patriarchal, stifling and oppressive, women were actively involved in national movements and constituted a critical part of the collective memory of national independence.

As bearers of national identity and culture, women play a determining role in the reconstruction of national identity; however, very often, their involvement gets shaped or controlled by a masculinised nation-state and its traditions. Their transformation, therefore, triggers socio-cultural change and is detrimental in the preservation of the national identity. Anam says in her interview with Terry Hong that she is interested in women as heroes, in the unexpected ways that women are heroic.

A Golden Age thus promises hope of the transformation of the roles of third world women and draws attention to the significance of women's narratives of nation in preserving collective/national identity.

NOTES

1 Lois A. West, *Feminist Nationalism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 13.
2 TahmimaAnam. *A Golden Age* (London: John Murray, 2007), 3.
3 Anam, *A Golden*, 5.
4 Anam, *A Golden,* 32.
5 Anam, *A Golden,* 33.
6 Anam, *A Golden*, 33.
7 Anam, *A Golden,* 104.
8 See note 6 above.
9 Karyn Stapleton and John Wilson, "Gender, Nationality and Identity: A Discursive Study," *European Journalof Women's Studies* 11, no.1 (2004): 45.
10 Lewis A. Coser, ed and trans. *Maurice Halbwachson Collective Memory,* (University of Chicago Press. 1992), 2.
11 Kamila Shamsie, "Windows on a Mother's War," *The Guardian*. (March 2007), www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview21
12 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*. (London: Sage. 1997), 1.

13 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation,* (London: Sage. 1997), 2.
14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.
15 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1, No. 2, (1987), 126.
16 Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-2.
17 Elleke Boehmer. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22.
18 West, *Feminist,* 11.
19 West, *Feminist,* 13.
20 Tahmima Anam. "I have a complicated relationship with Bangladesh," interview by Claire Armistead, *The Guardian*, May 2016. www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/13/tahmima-anam-i-have-complicated-relationship-with-bangladesh-interview
21 Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity,* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 52.
22 Jyoti Puri. *Women, Body and Desire in Postcolonial India* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.
23 Neloufer De Mel. *Women and the nation's narrative: Gender and nationalism in twentieth century Sri Lanka.* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 13.
24 Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders,* 3.
25 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33.
26 Mohanty et al., eds. *Third World Women*, 35.

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Gender and Atomic Victimhood: Hayashi Kyoko and the Reclaiming of the Female Body

Atisha Rai

The body has largely been neglected in the narratives of the atomic bombings that came out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the end of the Asia Pacific War in 1945. It is an irony that the body that was burned, mangled, riddled with maggots, and exposed to deadly radiation in the two Japanese cities has been erased from these narratives.While there is no dearth of information regarding the bomb's effects on human bodies, these are purely scientific details that lack the horror and despair of the victims.For example, notice the following paragraph from a report on the effects of the atomic bombings compiled by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey:

> . . . Flash burns thus followed the explosion instantaneously. The fact that relatively few victims suffered burns of the eyeballs should not be interpreted as an indication that the radiant heat followed the flash, or that time was required to build up to maximum heat intensity. The explanation is simply that the structure of the eye is more resistant to heat than is average human skin . . . [1]

Carol Cohn has argued that the language used to talk about nuclear weapons relies heavily on sexual and domestic images. The phallic missile is seen as masculine and it penetrates a target assumed to be female. Using everyday words while talking about nukes, Cohn writes, has not only domesticated and humanized the weapon but made it alright "to ignore sentient human bodies, human lives",

i.e. the victims.[2] Humans are invisible in the nuclear discourse as exemplified in the passage above.

Now, compare the US Strategic Bombing Survey report to a survivor's account of witnessing the very effects the report lists. Here is hibakusha writer Yoko Ota describing the state of hibakushas or atomic bomb survivors:

> Their bodies were distended. Like the bodies of people who have drowned. Their faces were fat and enormously puffed up. Their eyes were swollen shut, and the skin around their eyes was crinkly and pink . . . and hanging down from both arms like rags was gray-colored skin.[3]

The act of violence is performed on the body. In Hiroshima it was the body that was burned and bloated in the aftermath of the atomic bombings. The heat from the bombs melted the corpses, making it impossible to distinguish between male and female, human and animal. Even years later, hibakushas lived under the looming threat of radiation, worried that their bodies could betray them anytime. Hayashi Kyoko's writings are deeply influenced by her experience of the atomic bombings of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. Hayashi was born in Nagasaki in 1930 and spent her childhood in Shanghai. She returned to her hometown in March 1945 and was mobilized to work at a munitions plant when the US dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Since her debut in the 1960s, Hayashi has written extensively about the atomic bomb. Her writings reflect her anxiety about her body and her fears of passing on her radiation sickness, and hence her hibakusha identity, to her child. The violated and scarred female bodies of atomic victims are central to Hayashi's writings. In a society that laid stress on women's domestic and reproductive roles, what did it mean to be a woman who fulfilled neither of the two roles of a wife and a mother?—first because female atomic survivors were not seen as ideal partners and second because the bomb had

altered their bodies. Hayashi explores motherhood as experienced by the hibakusha woman and in her writings it takes on a different meaning. While her contemporaries like Kono Taeko and Takahashi Takako were, through their writings, subverting the traditional idea of a Japanese woman and exploring subjects like female identity, sexuality, and subjectivity, Hayashi grappled with questions about what it meant to be a woman and an atomic victim. Can one be both or either? When the female body has been violated and its biological functions disrupted, what does it mean to be a woman? This paper discusses, through an analysis of two short stories "Procession on a Cloudy Day"and "Masks of Whatchamacallit", Hayashi's reclaiming of the female body. The first section explores the writing of the body in postwar Japanese literature while the second looks at the representation of the hibakushas in film and literature. The third and final section of the paper analyses Hayashi's stories and the portrayal of the female hibakusha body.

BODY IN POSTWAR JAPANESE LITERATURE

During the wartime period, the Japanese state had laid claim to the bodies of its citizens and the body was at the centre of the country's nationalistic discourse. The individual body (nikutai) that was seen as carnal was contrasted with the 'kokutai' or the national body. "The kokutai became something of a state religion, with the mystical emperor at the apex, and it transformed in the war years into a particularly formidable edifice that brooked no dissent."[4] Wartime ideology encouraged the Japanese to contribute to national projects and abandon their personal needs. The condition of the nikutai was seen as directly reflecting the state of the empire. There was a direct relationship between the body of an individual and the body of a nation, with the condition of one determining the condition of the other. A strong healthy nation must have strong healthy citizens. Hence, the Japanese empire initiated disciplinary measures to control

individual bodies so that they served the interests of the state. The kokutai took precedence over the nikutai. The military had used the bodies of Japanese soldiers and civilians as easily dispensable resources. The latter, too, had come to believe that by sacrificing their physical bodies for the state, they were dying a noble death. The kamikazi pilots who conducted suicide missions are perhaps the most popular example. The body was dedicated to the service of the nation and every Japanese was expected to sacrifice it if asked to do so by the empire. The individual body, according to Slaymaker, was "suppressed and pitted against the cause of the national body".[5] It only seems natural then that in the postwar period, once free from the control of the state, Japanese writers glorified the individual body and saw it as the source of liberation.

Douglas Slaymaker, while analyzing the fiction of three writers he calls "flesh writers", argues that the writings of Tamura Taijirō, Noma Hiroshi, and Sakaguchi Ango were a protest against the wartime undervaluation of the body. Through their literature, they redefined the conceptions of the body in postwar Japan. By redefining the body as carnal, the postwar Japanese writers were subverting the taking over of the body by the state. They were rejecting the wartime ideology of self-sacrifice and liberating themselves from the state's control. According to Slaymaker:

> They (the flesh writers) were convinced that the mistakes of the past war were attributable to the wartime state's undervaluation of the body. Establishing a proper respect for the individual body promised a new start. The flesh writers suggested that renewed emphasis on the physical could offset the disastrously mistaken focus of the militarist past and help avoid another lapse into militarism.[6]

In the new democratic Japan, the body became a source of freedom and liberation. But the body that they imagined was gendered

and clearly male and depended on the body of the female 'Other'. Moreover, the occupation of Japan by foreign men had emasculated the Japanese male identity and it was only through the sexualized body of the female that they could create a new male subjectivity. As the occupying forces dismantled the Japanese empire and the military establishment, it also broke down structures that had anchored Japanese male identity. With the dismantling of the military, that supreme image of masculinity—the soldier—was destroyed and all expressions of aggression prohibited. Not only were gender roles redrawn, the reconfiguration of society meant men lost their sanctioned roles which "threatened their masculinity and therefore their identity".[7] Many postwar male writers sought to reimagine the male body and liberate it from the clutches of not only the prewar military state but also the post-war foreign authorities. This liberation was through the body of a woman. In Nosaka Akiyuki's short story "American Hijiki", Toshio believes that Japan's defeat was brought on by the weak bodies of the Japanese people as compared to the muscular bodies of the American. As a young boy growing up in the occupation era, Toshio's image of the Americans is based on his encounters with the American GIs. The strong and healthy bodies of the Americans are tied to Toshio's memories of postwar Japan and defeat.

Michael S. Molasky notes that many male postwar writers articulated their experience of the defeat through the sexual violation of women. The women's bodies became a site of violence where the country's history was symbolically played out.[8] In the immediate aftermath of Japan's surrender, the top priority of the authorities was safeguarding the Japanese women from the brute American soldiers who, they believed, would rape their women. This fear was, in fact, born out of their own experience as perpetrators. To handle the sexual desires of the Occupation soldiers, the Japanese resorted to organized prostitution, setting up state-sanctioned brothels. Women who "volunteered" for the job were thanked for their self-sacrifice.[9]

Thus, the post-war period in Japan began with the exploitation of women's bodies. With the abolishment of regulated prostitution in 1946, the Japanese government found another way to monitor and control the female body: by hunting down prostitutes and taking them in for forced medical examinations. The 'panpan' was an icon of the early postwar period. Due to their close links to the American GIs and their uncontrolled sexuality they were seen as a threat to Japanese values of chastity and virtue. As Molasky notes, the panpans rejection of traditional female roles of domesticity and motherhood were seen as subversive. This subversive nature was heightened by the panpan's sexual relations with the occupiers.[10] In the writings of postwar male Japanese writers, the prostitutes become a symbol of liberation. They offer an antidote to the traditions and laws of society that bind men. In the female body of the prostitute the men search for salvation and freedom. However, in their attempts to liberate the (male) body, the writers were still resorting to the prevailing patriarchal structures.[11]

Meanwhile, the Japanese women writers writing in the 1960s were unhappy about what it meant to be a woman in modern Japanese society. Through their writings they sought to redefine the role of women as more than just "good mothers and wives" and break away from the normative gender roles assigned by society. Their female protagonists were "frequently wanton, excessive, or selfish and brazenly cynical with regard to "traditional" conceptions of love, marriage, and motherhood".[12] Though post-war legislations introduced equality of the sexes, in truth women were still in charge of the domestic sphere even as the men went out to rebuild the nation. In 1960s Japan, the term feminity was associated with the nurturing and passive qualities that women were supposed to exhibit. Feminine was seen as the opposite of masculine and the two characteristics were mutually exclusive. The counterpart of the modern Japanese male, the salaryman, was the housewife. This was a remnant of the pre-war ideology that saw women in supporting roles that had been carried

over to postwar Japan. During the wartime period, women were traditionally seen as "producers of future soldiers" and "protectors of hearth and home" which is why, according to Bullock, Japan was reluctant to use the services of married women.[13] This view of women as the anchor of the household continued into the postwar era. Being a woman in 1960s Japan meant taking on the roles of mothers and wives. The state played an important role in disciplining the female body by pushing the ideals of pure love. A woman was expected to satisfy her sexual desires only within the confines of marriage. Writing during a period of high prosperity and economic boom, women writers like Takahashi Takako and Kono Taeko challenged and critiqued the gendered division of labour and the view that women were sexually passive.[14] If these writers were trying to subvert the constructed notion of the female by redefining the role of women in Japanese society, this avenue was not open to Hayashi.

REPRESENTING THE BOMBED BODY

In literature, film, and popular culture, the bodies of atomic survivors are often portrayed as monstrous. The nuclear fears of the 1950s that shook Japan following the Lucky Dragon incident gave birth to Godzilla, a monster that awoke following the hydrogen nuclear tests. Much has been written about Godzilla and nukes; about how the Japanese confronted their violent past through the grotesque figure of Godzilla,[15] of the monster as a metaphor for Hiroshima with its "heavily furrowed skin or scales" representing the keloid scars of atomic bomb survivors.[16] Such representations dispel the experience of the hibakushas to the realm of fantasy. Meanwhile, other narratives sought to portray the survivors, especially women hibakushas, as pure and innocent victims who suffered the bomb's atrocities in silence and with courage. Their victimization was seen as fate rather than the result of a violent war. Their stories, we are told, exemplified fortitude and resolve. The case of the 'Hiroshima Maidens' illustrates this

point. The maidens were a group of 25 women who were burned and disfigured during the Hiroshima bombings. In 1955, they were taken to the US to undergo plastic surgery on their faces and bodies. The maidens' visit put on public display the damaged bodies of atomic victims but it also sent the message that they could be cured. If the sight of the maidens' scarred faces elicited horror, it also gave people hope. The American media failed to distinguish between emergency plastic surgery and "elective cosmetic surgery used to facilitate beauty" thereby suggesting that the Maidens hoped to and could regain their beauty. As David Serlin has pointed out, the Maidens became "the poster children for whom the stigmas of bodily damage inflicted by the chaos of applied physics could be healed through the miracles of modern medicine".[17]

Atomic victimhood was gendered with more instances of bomb-related illnesses and deaths being reported among female victims. They also faced harsher discrimination due to their status as hibakushas. Many female hibakushas even hid their identities as victims to avoid social stigma. Studies found that women who were exposed to the bomb faced increased chances of miscarriages and stillbirths. Children born to female hibakushas risked birth defects and other disorders. Their status as hibakushas also made it difficult for women to find a suitable marriage partner. In 1945, there was limited knowledge about radiation illness but rumours were strife that their disease was contagious which made it difficult for hibakushas to find housing and employment. Atomic victimhood made it impossible for the women to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother. Rodney Barker explains:

> A society that placed such great emphasis upon aesthetic presentation and losing face in every sense offered no place for their kind. Some were kept in back rooms for years by parents ashamed of them, while others were so afraid of public ridicule that whenever they ventured out in daylight they scurried down

> side streets with shawls wrapped tightly around their bent heads. Employers refused to hire them because, they said, it would be too demoralizing to have them around, and marriage was out of the question because it was roundly believed they would give birth to a generation of genetic monstrosities.[18]

While discussing the representation of young hibakusha women in films, Maya Morioka Todeschini argues that while the female survivors of the bomb are portrayed as "pathetic victims" and their innocent beauty and purity contrasted with their deformities and illness, they are also seen as embodying womanly values that allows them to endure their pain stoically and grow stronger in the process.[19] Such representations, she points out, not only make suffering aesthetic, they also endow hibakusha women with existing traditional notions about womanhood. In the process, the bodies of the women become ahistorical and apolitical.[20] By romanticizing their illness and death, such portrayals of atomic survivors turn the Hiroshima experience into yet another tragic story about untimely death and fail to explore the hibakushas' experience within the larger context of war, violence, and imperialism. Moreover, their bravery in the face of trauma and their innocence and beauty transform them into romantic heroines. The female hibakushas in such films are never scarred or disfigured for such images neither appear romantic nor inspiring. According to Todeschini, the bomb only serves to increase the women's spiritual qualities and highlight the virtues of an ideal Japanese woman[21]. Hayashi Kyoko abandons such optimism and focuses not so much on the suffering of the hibakushas but their fears and anxieties. She eschews the self-sacrificing and stoic "heroine" in favour of women who may appear un-victim like, thereby subverting the very idea of how a victim should or should not behave.

The body of a hibakusha was a mysterious and terrifying object that was a harbinger of the atomic age and perhaps, even the end of the world. This mystery and fear was further heightened by lack

of information, and sometimes intentional suppression of such information, regarding radiation disease. The press code imposed by the US-led allied force that occupied Japan between 1945 and 1952 prohibited the publication of photos showing the disfigured survivors and victims of the bombings. Such censorship further removed the bodies of hibakushas from narratives about the bomb.

WRITING THE FEMALE HIBAKUSHA BODY

Hayashi explores the dehumanization of the female body and shares in her works the anxiety of other female hibakushas. In her stories, the female body is a source of anxiety and fear where the fate of the nuclear world plays out. Alienated from their physical self, their bodies become the 'Other'. Hayashi often juxtaposes the diseased and decaying bodies of the female survivors with the healthy male bodies of non-survivors, indicating that atomic victimhood is gendered. In "Procession on a Cloudy Day", the sight of a group of anti-nuclear protesters drives the unnamed hibakusha narrator to contemplate the bomb, a-bomb disease, and motherhood, as if the three were intricately linked. Walking the streets of a beach town near Tokyo, the narrator is stifled by the sight of healthy bodies that exude sexuality. These sexually-charged bodies provide a foil for a young keloid-scarred hibakusha activist who appears "as small and ugly as worm-eaten fruit" in front of his peers.[22] The narrator is intensely aware of the fragility of her own body. She admits that she never blows her nose for fear of nose bleeds; not even when she has a cold. Instead, she opens her mouth and takes gulps of air. Her body, she thinks, is only bones held together to look like an ordinary human but if one were to press them between their fingers, they would fall apart.[23] Teiko's story only seems to confirm the narrator's fears about her body's vulnerability. Teiko recounts to her the cremation of her brother who had died after being exposed to atomic radiation. A man at the crematorium had told Teiko that all bomb victims had

the bones of an old man, brittle. He explained that since they had once been burned alive, their bones crumbled when the heat was turned up.

Even the free medical examination that survivors are expected to undergo every six months becomes a source of anxiety for the narrator. The notification from the private health center reminding her of the tests feels "like a fingernail scratching off the scab of a partially healed wound". The narrator and Teiko had defied the odds and survived despite experts' predictions that anyone within 1.5 km of the hypocentre would perish: "Teiko and I had survived in a place where death was a foregone conclusion. We were freaks. Freaks given the name of special A-bomb victims."[24] But her survival itself seemed insignificant and random. She had done nothing more to survive than the people who had died. They had tried to save themselves just the way she had.

During a quiet moment with her son, the narrator receives her medical tests reports that show abnormalities in her blood. The happy moment is shattered by this seemingly mundane piece of paper and her earlier confidence and contentment seem like an illusion. Constantly living under the threat of atomic diseases, a survivor is never free from the event of the atomic bombings. Their bodies are reminders not only of the tragedy but also of the death they narrowly and miraculously missed; that they survived when so many could not and that their lives may as easily be snuffed out one day by the bomb that continues to live on in their bodies. Now, she sees her son in a new light, through the eyes of a hibakusha mother. He is smaller than his first grade classmates and you can easily put your hands around his thin neck, she observes. His physical make-up resembled hers and he even had a lymph node on his neck, just like she did when she was a student. Observing these similarities, she is suddenly gripped by fear: has she passed down her atomic disease to her son?The thought of dying brings not the fear of death but of leaving her son alone, weak and unprotected. She thinks:

> If I died now, I thought, my son, sucking his thumb, a sock down around his ankle, would still tag along behind his bigger friends, playing outside until it got dark . . . But he might not stay outside. He might go to his room and read, alone. The light switches in our house are up high. When it gets dark, will he be able to reach them? I can't bear to think about such things.[25]

Her husband who did not experience the bomb has a more pragmatic approach to her sickness. "Leave it to the experts," he always told her. While he seemed to know all about the bomb, even how long his wife would live—when asking for her hand in marriage he had simply said, "You're a bomb victim, but you have ten years to live. I guarantee it"—his attitude toward the bomb was different from the survivors.

In Hayashi's story, there is a tension between the victims and the non-victims, especially husbands and wives. In "Procession on a Cloudy Day", she acknowledges the loneliness of a survivor who must learn to endure things alone. Refusing her husband's offer to take her to the hospital, the narrator remarks, "It's just that even if he's near me, I am still alone. I am the bomb victim. And the sooner I get used to enduring things alone, the better."[26] Like Teiko, all she can hope for is dignity in death. Going through her medical check-up, she finally understands why Teiko refused to see her son even on her death bed. She had wanted to die with the bomb, with its damages hidden inside her. The narrator concedes that hibakusha mothers only want to protect their sons and daughters from the same fate:

> Our sons are second-generation bomb victims. They might die the same way. There's no need to show them what it's like, or even what leads up to it. That's why I go to the hospital alone.[27]

The story concludes with a cheerful crowd joining the anti-nuclear

activists marching towards Hiroshima. The weary keloid-scarred hibakusha youth leads the group. The narrator remarks that the crowd of young people who have joined him will see him off and return back to their normal lives. Only she and he will continue to plod ahead. Hayashi situates their bombed bodies within the country's postwar nuclear history and suggests that their bodies carry memories of the atomic bombs and it is only they, the survivors, who will continue the fight against nuclear weapons. While non-survivors can return to their "normal" lives, the hibakushas are denied the right to do so.

Popular representations of hibakusha women subscribe to the dominant narratives of how a "good" female atomic survivor ought to behave. In "Masks of Whatchamacallit", Hayashi dwells on the bomb's effects on women's biological, particularly reproductive, functions. Survivor testimonies have generally focused on the day of the bombing and its immediate aftermath but the bomb's effects spanned decades and affected those born after 1945. The bomb had put the future at risk by violating and polluting women's bodies. Hayashi notes in "Masks":

> With women, many cases of sterility were reported due to the death of reproductive cells. The percentage of miscarriage was also high. The greatest disturbance, I heard, was seen among growing children. It was not rare that menstruation began suddenly after the bombing, or that bleeding did not stop.[28]

Their bodies had become 'other' that could betray them without any warning. Their biological rhythms, particularly menstruation cycles, were disrupted and that only heightened the hibakusha women's insecurities and anxieties about their bodies and their reproductive capacities. If in Kono Taeko's stories, a regular menstruation cycle affirms her female protagonists' negation of motherhood, in Hayashi's work it becomes a symbol of their healthy bodies and an affirmation of their potential to become mothers. In a society that idealized

women as mothers and wives, the hibakusha women were seen as abnormal. Further, the survivors feared that the bomb had affected their wombs and their children would be monstrous. In "Masks", Takako and the narrator, both atomic bomb survivors, grapple with these fears. Their hibakusha identity disrupts their assigned roles as wives and mothers and threatens the lives of their children.

Hayashi points out that hibakusha women held no hopes for marriage because "No one would choose to marry a woman with a bad background".[29] Those who did get married either hid their identity from their partners or lived in constant threat of the a-bomb illness. While Takako and the narrator never shed their victimhood, their marriages were overshadowed by it. Takako believed that her marriage was ideal for "she neither loved nor was loved"[30] suggesting that that is perhaps the only kind of marital relationship a hibakusha can hope for. Once divorced from her husband, she is free from societal expectations about how a wife and hibakusha women should behave. K tells the narrator that Takako buys young men for money because that is the only way a hibakusha who has lost one breast to cancer can get a man to hold her. Hayashi subverts the idea of how a 'good' hibakusha woman should behave in portraying the divorced and childless Takako as a sexual being. Through her carnal body, Takako affirms her own life: "I wish to hold young men, imbibe some of their energy, and make sure of my own life. I want a solid sense of being alive. There's nothing else in my hands."[31]

During her interactions with hibakushas, Maya Todeschini found that male hibakushas were not as anxious about transferring their radiation disease to their children as the women survivors. This is understandable as any birth defects were usually considered the women's fault.[32] Such views were internalized by the hibakushas. Takako saw their bodies as "flawed merchandise" that should be handled carefully.[33] Worried about giving birth to a deformed baby, she gets an abortion only to find that her baby would have been born healthy and normal "with perfect fingers and toes".[34] The narrator,

too, shares Takako's fears and wonders if her baby will be strange. In order to give birth to a normal child she seals away in an envelope all bomb-related images that may influence her pregnancy:

> Among the photos I put in the envelope was one of a little girl in a padded air raid hat, eyes and nose indistinguishable because of burns. Whatever might have happened to her mother, the girl sat all alone on the rubble . . . I put the photo of a mother's charred body into the envelope, too. A baby was by her side, charred uniformly black just like the mother . . . [35]

Women hibakushas kept a close watch on their bodies and even the slightest variation in biological functions was a cause of concern. The bomb's violence on their bodies was relentless. A week after the bombing, Takako began menstruating. She bled for three months. The narrator associates menstruation with a healthy body that is now ready to give birth. But when her own cycle starts, she is terrified for it could either mean normal growth or a result of radiation. "Each time a clot of blood was discharged, I felt it in my as yet thin pelvis, and each throbbing flow of blood took something away from my body. I felt insecure."[36] What should have been a cause of celebration and an intimate moment between a mother and daughter is instead marked by terror. As a little girl, the narrator had run through the streets of Shanghai to buy the mysterious box of "Queen Rose" for her sisters. The task of purchasing the sanitary napkins had been a secret shared in hushed voices that carried "womanlike tenderness" between the mother and daughters. Lured by the talcum scent of the Queen Rose, the narrator would open the crimson box alone in a room. "I felt as if that would be enough to make me a beautiful adult."[37] But when the day of celebration arrives, her body is rotting and there is no Queen Rose to mark her transformation to a woman. Queen Rose had held two meanings for the narrator: "a sign of passage to beautiful

adulthood" and "a healthy body capable of giving birth".[38] In its absence, such meanings collapse suggesting that the narrator can neither hope for a healthy body nor a beautiful adulthood. Faced with the fear and dilemma created by her own body, she wishes to go back to her "genderless" childhood.

Hayashi Kyoko's representation of the female hibakusha raises important questions about body, gender, and identity. Her writings reflect the anxiety and trauma of the female atomic survivors that were directly linked to their irradiated bodies. Hayashi was a survivor herself and she grappled with issues of sexuality, motherhood, and feminity. Her hibakusha characters are made of flesh and bone; they urge us to reflect on the threat of complete annihilation in the nuclear age. They expose their decaying bodies as proof of what violence and modern warfare can do to humanity. Hayashi's stories are inhabited by women hibakushas like Takako who subvert the traditional notion of a 'good' victim and force us to consider questions of gender when discussing victimhood.

NOTES

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Effacing The Victim; Inscribing The Self: Reading Incest, Traumatic Memory and Comics in Debbie Drechsler's Autography, *Daddy's Girl*

Rohit Prasad

The genre of autobiographical comics finds its roots in the underground comix[1] movement in America of the 1970s. It was a time when stories, mostly subversive, and often sexually explicit, were first being produced in the comics form. These stories were mostly based on their authors' personal experiences, either relating to their memories of childhood trauma—caused by domestic violence, sexual abuse, the war—or their experiences of growing up as a peripheral person, unable to effectively weave themselves into the social fabric. This progression opened a new opportunity, of *writing about the self,* to a new group of individuals, who in turn challenged and then consequently transformed, the traditional (and sometimes conservative) notion about the autobiographical genre as being focused on the lives of "great men". I use the word men quite consciously here as there were very few women comics writers who managed to both produce and publish their work in the "aboveground", mainstream tradition, until finally, when they forayed into the underground. The comics genre, as such, has a long history that is rooted in protest: a history that has always aimed at disrupting the veneer of politeness and propriety donned by the human society; and these authors (of the underground comix revolution), including the one we are about to discuss, with their controversial yet brave life narratives, have kept this tradition of protest alive.

Published in the book form[2] in the year 1995, *Daddy's Girl* by Debbie Drechsler is a work of autographical fiction[3] that deals with

the issue of a girl's sexual abuse at the hands of her own father and the concomitant trauma arising out of it. The diegesis, composed as a collection of short stories, revolves around the life of an adolescent girl called Lily, who is haunted by her father's abusive character, and who shares an uneasy (and sometimes cold) relationship with her mother. The problematic childhood that Lily experiences informs most of her actions throughout the course of the narrative, especially her attitude towards others and her low self-esteem. These experiences of childhood trauma are narrated to us by the protagonist's adult self (which is the author herself). What is interesting about *Daddy's Girl* is the manner in which it exploits the graphic vocabulary of the comics format (the panels, the gutters, the image-word juxtaposition) in order to delineate its child protagonist's complicated and traumatized state of mind. *Daddy's Girl,* as such, becomes an important autographical text because it theorizes sexual abuse, traumatic memory and comics.

FRAGMENTATION: THE NARRATIVE VOICE, TRAUMA, AND THE DUAL SELF

Daddy's Girl follows a self-reflexive mode of narration in the sense that it graphically presents a tension between the two voices that relate the stories. One of these two voices belongs to the child subject Lily, the protagonist of the story, and the other is that of the author, Drechsler herself, that comments on and interprets Lily's every thought and action. On being asked whether *Daddy's Girl* was a semi-autobiographical work and whether she considered Lily as her literary alter-ego, Drechsler replied, saying:

> Lily is definitely my (young) literary alter-ego. I started out planning to write the whole truth and nothing but the truth but discovered that good storytelling and truth didn't get along very well, so I embellished and lied and basically created fiction from my life. I'm not sure what semi-autobiographical

> means but what I ended up striving for was to convey the emotional landscape that I wandered through as a child and used whatever devices I felt I needed to do that.[4]

The above statement sheds light on at least two, if not more, attributes that are intrinsic to the understanding and appreciation of this work: first, that Lily is the author's literary alter-ego; and second, that *Daddy's Girl* is a partly fictionalized story based on the author's own childhood. Drechsler admits that "good storytelling and truth don't get along very well"[5] which implies that there is an element of constructedness in her narrative which is quite meditated. The dual narrative voice of these stories, therefore, can be read as a technique employed by the author to underscore the inconsistency of human identity; to point out that there is no unified self; and that it is our experiences that define our being.

In other words, Drechsler quite deliberately creates a rift in the narrative voice of the stories to put across this contention that identities, especially the identities of children who have experienced trauma (in the form of sexual abuse or otherwise), are essentially fragmentary and need recomposition. Children subjected to abuse suffer from a sense of internal fragmentation caused by trauma arising out of their previous memories. Their traumatic experiences become unforgettable and haunt them for the rest of their lives. Their memories are composed of events that they do not want to remember, but they are helpless because they cannot forget them. As such, they suffer from a sort of duality of identity. Their past casts an everlasting shadow on their present self. Critic and author, Hillary Chute, in her book *Graphic Women*, calls this phenomenon (where an individual's desire to forget, is followed by their inability to forget a particular event), "the paradox of traumatic memory".[6] She says that the "seeming paradox of traumatic memory"[7] is that that "people forget trauma but do not forget it enough"[8] and "(while these memories may no longer be verbal, they yet drive

behavior.)"[9] And, in the very same section, prior to the above comment, recalling Seyla Benhabib's concept of selfhood in order to comment on cartoonist Linda Barry's work(s), she writes:

> "Barry's work is about a process: of remembering, of reconstructing, of narrativizing; in this sense it recalls Seyla Benhabib's concept of selfhood and the constitutive role of narrative in which "making sense" involves—in opposition to beginning, unfolding, ending—the "psychodynamic capacity to go on, to retell, to remember, to reconfigure."[10]

The above comment, I believe (although made in the context of Barry's works), is applicable to Drechsler's work as well, because *Daddy's Girl* too, with its assortment of textured images and words, is about a process of collection, condensation and renarrativization of memories. What I am trying to argue here is that *Daddy's Girl* is not just a simple recollection of Drechsler's childhood memories of trauma, it is also a renarrativization or reconfiguration of those memories. As a child, Drechsler lacked the strength (and the maturity) to deal with the abusive environment that she grew up in. She was raised in a familial setup where she found herself uncomfortable, trying to share her feelings with the other members of her family. Lily too, shares a similar situation in the book. She shares a cold relationship with her mother and her siblings as well. In the very first chapter of the collection, titled "Visitors in The Night", we find Lily asking for help after her father compels her into a fellatio. "Pearl? Are you awake? Huh? Pearl?"[11] she keeps asking her sister who shares the room with her but fails to acquire any response—let alone help—from her sister. Later in the night, feeling unheard, she quietly sneaks into their kitchen and overeats cookies to cut out the taste of her "daddy's [y]ucky junk".[12] And what follows is an overtly emotional episode where we find the lonely Lily corresponding with the owl shaped jar in which she hides her cookies. Her speech is

contained in a thought bubble which reads "Thankyou, Mr. Owl man, you're my only friend in the whole world."[13] Again, a few hours later, when Lily feels quite restless while attempting to sleep, she is depicted saying "Mommy! Someone! Help me! Help?"[14] And there's nobody who hears her or comes to her rescue except for a few astral projections. Her conversations with inanimate objects (the jar and the specters) reveal the fact that Lily has literally no one to talk to, not even her mother or sister for that matter. Drechsler must have had similar experiences as a child; she too must have been unheard; must have been denied a voice. And perhaps, this is the reason why she created a narrative out of her traumatic experiences, which she

Fig.1 "Visitors in the Night". From Daddy's Girl. (By Debbie Drechsler. Canada: Fantagraphics Books,1995,3.) Copyright © Debbie Drechsler. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

could never share as a child. As such, these stories can possibly be read as the author's attempt to reclaim her voice; to create a space for relating her traumatic experiences; to collect the fragmented memories of her past and 'reconfigure' herself.

MATERIALIZING MEMORY: STYLE AND THE COMICS FORM[15]

> "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, oh reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished."[16]
>
> —Thomas De Quincey

Thomas De Quincey, the renowned essayist and critic of the 19th century, in his famous essay "The Palimpsest of the Human Brain", compared the human mind to a palimpsest. A palimpsest, put simply, is a piece of parchment on which writings have been replaced repeatedly but not effaced. The human mind, says De Quincey, is like a palimpsest marked repeatedly by our memories, but in a manner such that its previous inscriptions are not expunged. It is interesting that De Quincey includes the word "images" among the list of other words that he uses to describe human memory. Memories, especially traumatic memories, get recorded or rather inscribed on our brain in the form of fragmentary images and remain stored there, deep within our psyche, unless they are reproduced, quite magically, on being triggered or recalled.

This analogy between the graphic/visual nature of memories (especially traumatic ones) and the comics form is something that author Elizabeth El Rafaie explores in her book *Autobiographical Comics*. El Rafaie draws a parallel between comics and the "life writing" tradition to enunciate certain structural and conceptual

similarities underlying both these genres. Following author Timothy Dow Adams'[17] line of thought, El Rafaie claims that the ancient Greek word "graphe" (often suffixed behind the words 'auto' and 'bio' to form autobiography and biography respectively to suggest unique yet differentiated ways of self-expression) is "more accurately translated by *marking* than by *writing*".[18] As such, she analyzes the definition of the term "graphy" (from "graphe") and revises it to include the aspect of visualization within the scope of its definition. In this process, El Rafaie establishes a link between the tradition of "life writing" (a tradition which relies, quite heavily, on the role of memory) and comics (a form which uses both images and words as modes of expression). Put simply, the visual–verbal vocabulary of comics mirrors the compositional structure of memory (since memories are composed of both words and images) and as such comics becomes a suitable medium of articulation for narratives that explore the inner workings of the human mind.

To carry this argument further, critic and author Hillary Chute—recounting psychiatrist and researcher Lenore Terr—writes:

> Traumatic memory tends to be more fragmentary and condensed than regular memory—a good description of the basic form of comics. And "we remember terrible events with a marked spatial sense" while temporal perspective (sequencing, causality) is often lost in trauma. "Memories of our placement in space are among the best entry points we have to our old memories," Terr emphasizes. "We can literally map out on paper or mentally follow our childhood selves". Comics is deeply relevant for this mapping: authors are able to put their child bodies in space on the page. The basic structural form of comics—which replicates the structure of traumatic memory with its fragmentation, condensation, and placements of elements in space—is able to express the movement of memory.[19]

What Chute is trying to put across in the above passage is simply this, that comics, owing to its graphic form, is functionally more adept at communicating traumatic memories. Its basic structural elements, like the panels, the gutters and its visual–verbal register become important tools to the author when it comes to creating an innovative and effective diegesis based on traumatic human memories.

Comics, is inherently, an elliptical form. A traditional comics page primarily comprises two elements: panels and gutters. Panels are frames that contain the images and/or the words comprising the story. In other words, panels deal with all that is visible on the page. Gutters—the blank space separating the panels on a page—on the other hand, deal with the silences. Drechsler exploits this in-built elliptical template of comics to both replicate the elliptical nature of traumatic memories and to visually materialize it.

Daddy's Girl is an interesting comics text because it temporalizes the notion of space in order to highlight the structural similarities between comics and traumatic memories; and spatializes the notion of time to graphically represent the impact of trauma on its author's state of mind. *Daddy's Girl* spatializes time by tracing its narrator's memories on to its pages thereby giving them a visual dimension. The juxtaposition of the panels against the gutters creates a ruffling effect on the previously blank page thereby making it fragmented and discontinuous. Traumatic memory (as explained by Chute above) embodies a similar structure. It is highly fragmented and discontinuous (unlike episodic memory that is rather smooth and continuous). Additionally, the comics page follows its own natural pace of movement. The existence of gutters (also known as pauses or spaces of silence) in between the narrative frames, rupture or rather modulate the speed of the reader. The comics text has a rhythm and a fluidity that is characteristically its own; which is not very different from the motion and rhythm that characterizes traumatic memory. Explaining this compositional rhythm of comics books, critic Laura

R. Micciche writes:

> The way our eyes move across the page of a comicbook—indeed, the way we come to comprehend the story—is best described as fluid and organic. Comicbooks invite layered readings; one can scan the pictures and discern much of the narrative before even reading the words, then, slow down the reading experience by beckoning us to read them even if we understand the movement of the story through pictures. And the words make us return to the pictures, reading them differently than we did at the first glance, reading them through the specificity that the words give them. There is a recursive quality to reading comics—we read and reread, absorbing new details each time and comprehending the significance of a page, for instance, only after the words and pictures in each panel have sunk in.[20]

Daddy's Girl uses this inherent rhythm and fluidity of the comics form to represent the punctured state of its narrator's mind. The organic movement/flow of *Daddy's Girl* parallels the unrestrained and fragmentary nature of its narrator's traumatized memories.

Again, *Daddy's Girl* defines space in temporal terms by literally converting its panels and gutters into moments of "lived time". I use the phrase "lived time"[21] in the sense Eugène Minkowski, the famous French psychiatrist used it. Influenced by Henri Bergson's philosophies on 'internal time', Minkowski argued that people suffering from schizophrenia (or trauma) exhibit a disconnect with reality. Their minds tend to exhibit a poor and degenerated sense of cognitive and affective responses, and as such they find themselves cut off from the temporal and spatial realities of the world. And thus, more often than not, they perceive time as a distorted or warped phenomenon.

The panels and gutters in *Daddy's Girl* represent time as it exists in their narrator's head. Drechsler, quite innovatively, uses the comics panel to palimpsest two different temporalities upon each other.[22] She uses a single panel to depict two distinct time frames (her past and her present) which is quite a nuanced way of thinking about the function of panels (in comics), which traditionally dealt with a single temporal register. As such, almost every panel in *Daddy's Girl*, becomes a moment out of its narrator's "lived time." In addition to this, the gutters too, in *Daddy's Girl,* function in the same way that time does. Drechsler uses the gutters to depict the way time folds and unfolds itself. There are places in the text, where the gutters follow the movement of real time, and then there are moments, where time slows down in between two panels, expanding itself. Explaining this aspect, of time slowing down in between the panels of *Daddy's Girl,* Laura R. Micciche writes:

> While Lily tells us that the sexual encounter with her father "took forever", the next panel jumps to a later moment where the father is buckling his pants and handing Lily her nightie. The reader only understands "forever" because of the word itself, not because we are able to see the actual encounter happening over an extended period of time. In real time it takes no longer to move between these two panels than it does between any other two. Any sense of real time is lost, making Lily's perception of "forever" more real than "the real". The reader understands that the sexual encounter did not actually "take forever," but that, for Lily, it felt like it did.[23]

The gutters too, then, in *Daddy's Girl* become embodiments of the narrator's "lived time".

Daddy's Girl is an artistically dense text. It's packed with details, not just structural or thematic but also stylistic. The child-like

drawings composed in black and white; their expressionistic texture; and the use of handwritten text in *Daddy's Girl* are highly telling of its author's artistic vision. Drechsler, quite efficiently, manages to marry the artistic style used in these stories with their content. Her style is in keeping with the underground tradition of appropriation. She follows the traditional "funnies" style of the doing cartoons, which was earlier meant for children, and exploits it—like most of the underground women writers—to narrate a story, as sensitive and controversial as child abuse. Joseph Witek, in his *Comic Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's Dirty Laundry*, writes:

Fig 2. "Marwin". From *Daddy's Girl*. (By Debbie Drechsler. Canada: Fantagraphics Books,1995,13.) Copyright © Debbie Drechsler. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

> As the name "underground suggests, intentional violation of societal taboos was central to the ideology of the comics movement, and in the undergrounds the drawing style previously identified with innocuous comics for kids became the preferred mode for the unrestrained depiction of sex, violence, and political rebellion. By exploiting the expressive potential latent in the symbolic mode, the underground cartoonists reconnected the style to its roots in social and political satire.[24]

Debbie Drechsler, belonging to the underground tradition, did not refrain from using the rebellious style and instead combined it with an expressionistic method of shading to give the text its potent claustrophobic texture. Expressionism as a movement began in the twentieth century and aimed at giving form to the subjective—and often inexpressible—realities of the human mind. Drechsler, in *Daddy's Girl*, uses the swaying and swirling lines, popularized by the expressionists, to reveal the distorted inner state of her protagonist's mind. The exaggeratedly executed sketches, packed with minute details, bring Lily's claustrophobic inner world to life; and make explicit, the impact of trauma on Lily's mind. Additionally, the absistence from the use of colors in her drawings, reveals the intensity of the impact that trauma has had on the protagonist's life, and most importantly, on her perception of the world. The use of black and white sketches only, underscores the fact that her memories of childhood trauma, have sucked the colors out of Lily's life.

This brings us to yet another important aspect of Drechsler's style: the use of handwritten text. The text of *Daddy's Girl*—sometimes qwerty, sometimes cursive, sometimes bold, and sometimes a mixture of all these compositional styles—is mostly handwritten. Apart from rendering a personal touch to the narrative, the use of handwriting in the text makes the work more reliable. The handwritten text brings the work closer to the form of journal/ diary writing, both of which

are highly autobiographical. Elaborating on the use of handwritten text in comics, Hillary Chute writes: "There is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page, an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting private images."[25] The use of the author's handwriting, alongside the drawings, adds veracity to the stories that the book contains; it also modulates the manner in which its audience envisions and perceives them. The handcrafted words appear as images on the page and slow down the process of reading the narrative, thereby eliciting its readers' attention. This slowing down of the reading process leads to the formation of a more informed and, consequently, a more discerning reader, who would eventually testify to the protagonist's trauma and empathize with it.

CREATING WITNESS: POLITICIZING INCEST THROUGH VISUALIZATION

Daddy's Girl—although it depicts its protagonist, Lily, and by extension of meaning, women, as victims of rape and sexual abuse—works in the direction of effacing the stigma that is inscribed on women's bodies post their abuse. It not only exposes the violence inscribed on women's bodies (and on their psyche as well) in the form of sexual abuse but also politicizes it by creating a material, cultural document—a witness—out of it. And the comics format of *Daddy's Girl* facilitates this act of creating witness, through visualizing both the act of incest and the traumatic memories that follow it.[26]

Drucilla Cornell, in her book *The Imaginary Domain*, writes:

> "... in the case of those of us who are designated as women, their sexual imago is both encoded and symbolically enforced so as to split women off from themselves as sexual objects and to re-impose the persona we associate with conventional femininity."[27]

Conventional femininity, as Cornell puts it, produces and preserves women as "pure" and "chaste" beings. It prizes women's virginity and views it as an essential component of their female identity. Elaborating on this notion of conventional femininity, Cornell writes:

> This splitting off [of women from their sexuality] marks a woman as her "sex" and thus rips her away from her identification

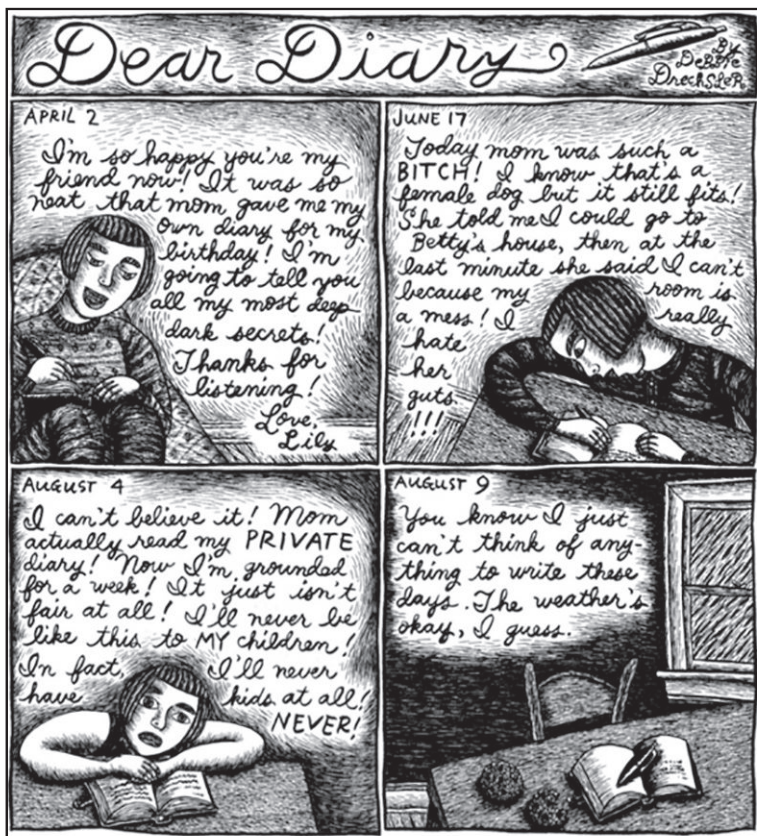

Fig 3. The use of handwriting in the text, "Dear Diary" from *Daddy's Girl* (By Debbie Drechsler. Canada: Fantagraphics Books,1995,10.) Copyright © Debbie Drechsler. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

> of herself as a woman *and* as a person beyond the persona or masquerade of femininity. "The wound of femininity" is one way to describe this ripping apart of one's sex and sexual persona away from any affirmation of oneself as a person with power and creativity. "*Vive la difference*" too often translates as: "Let women remain within the stereotyped characteristics of the masquerade of femininity." . . . These [psychological] and symbolic underpinnings [of conventional femininity] shape our reality to the extent that we are unable to truly envision the feminine as anything other than this persona of femininity.[28]

The mutilation of women's bodies through rape or sexual violence is what Cornell refers to as "the wound of femininity". It is important to note in this context that sexual abuse or rape is not just a physical act. The act, carries, along with itself, a succession of emotional and psychological implications. It results in a person's dissociation from his/ her feelings, thoughts and memories. It takes a woman's identity away from her.

This "wound of femininity" is what Lily suffers from in the book, *Daddy's Girl*. The sense of guilt and shame that characterizes Lily's personality is best delineated through the story titled "Daddy Knows Best." The chapter opens with Lily's father entering her room while Lily prepares herself for a shower. He then commands Lily to reveal her "little bazooms" to him and simultaneously threatens to inform her mother about how she has "led him on." Her father, then begins to feel her breasts saying, "You know only a tramp would throw herself at her father this way, right, Lil?"[29] In the panels that follow, we find Lily curling herself into a ball, on one of the rugs, in the bathroom where she is all alone. Lonely and cold, she repeats the comments her father made about her, moments ago. She says:

> "My dad said it's my fault he did it to me. He said I made him lose control. [. . .] He said they must've gone wrong somewhere

for me to become such a slut when I'm still so young. He said he knew I liked it when he did it to me. He said he could tell by the way I act, and by how I look at him. I wish I could figure out what I do so I could stop doing it."[30]

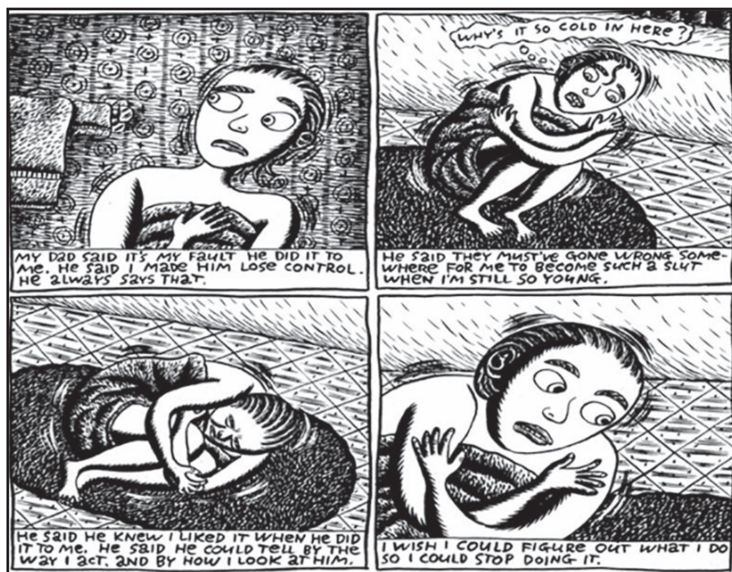

Fig 4. "Daddy Knows Best." From *Daddy's Girl* (By Debbie Drechsler. Canada: Fantagraphics Books, 1995, 32.) Copyright © Debbie Drechsler. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

This entire episode, at first, visualizes Lily's helplessness as a child; her lack of control over her body as her father exploits it. And then, it delineates the emotional guilt and the sense of shame that is evident in both her thoughts and her body language as her father humiliates her. It also reveals the mechanism through which traits like self-doubt and diffidence become intrinsic parts of Lily's being. This element of self-doubt shows itself later in the text when Lily wins a prize for art and yet her victory fails to register its impact on her. On being congratulated by her friend, Lily tells herself, "I guess I'll never be a good person but I might become a great artist . . . so

that my life won't be a complete waste, right?"[31]

Erin Wunker, in one of her chapters, comprised as notes on rape culture, offers a method of immunization against this fear of being shamed as victims of rape. She writes:

> I believe that rape, trauma and gendered violence are sites of struggle . . . talking is the only way to move forward. And I believe that this talking brings us more than just strength to "go on"; I believe that it will bring change. Not quickly. Not without discomfort. But it will.
>
> . . . I talk about the labor of talking about rape, and one of the points I make is how important it is to break the silence around rape, because the silence (born of guilt, trauma, and shame) gives the rapes and rapists more power. In that way, I believe that talking about gendered violence is an inherently political act.
>
> Talking. Telling stories. Trying to put it into words. That's what I am after. Trying to find the right words to say these things so that they are heard by people who don't already know, all day, every day, that we live in a rape culture and it affects us all, differently. Trying to find the words to name things that my body knows, that my friends' bodies know, but which we've never been able to say without being questioned, or shamed, or made to feel defensive. Trying to say these things so clearly as to be irrefutable. Trying to say them so that there is no room for argument and only room for action."[32]

Wunker is right when she says that talking about rape—despite the difficulty of talking about it—is the only way to bring change and move forward. She is also right in saying that there is a need to publicize rape and rape culture, and that too, through using the right words to make this sensitive issue comprehensible to everybody. But

an essential question that remains to be raised and answered here is: Are words enough? Are words enough to bring about a change? I don't think so. And this is precisely why—because speech can be falsified but vision cannot—I feel that the comics medium provides an appropriate language, or rather an improved vocabulary, for the expression and dissemination of narratives about gendered sexual violence. Comics, because it uses *visualization* as an essential element of narrativization, offers a potential language (to both its readers and the practitioners of this form) for indulging in discussions about sexual violence, child abuse and rape culture.

Daddy's Girl, as a narrative, employs the in-built visual medium of the comics form to create a witness for its narrator's traumatic memories. It politicizes both the act of incest and the concomitant shame accompanying it, by making the experiences of Lily (who, it should not be forgotten, is the author's literary alter ego) that are soaked in shame and guilt—public. Lily's violation and her trauma are *shown* to the readers. There are silences in the text which are quite deliberately placed. For instance, the physical act of incest is never shown by the author and is left for the audience to be imagined. The audience constantly fills and supplements the gaps in the text with their own life experiences (of pain and sorrow if not trauma) to derive meaning out of it. By doing so, the text makes the reader more sympathetic (if not empathetic) towards the protagonist.The audience of *Daddy's Girl* begins to feel a sense of responsibility towards Lily, and by extension of metaphor, towards all the survivors of sexual abuse. And in doing so, *Daddy's Girl* effaces the stigma that is inscribed on the bodies of all women who have experienced gendered physical violence.

NOTES

1 Note that the word 'comix' is used here instead of 'comics'. The 'x' stands for X-rated content.

2 The stories contained in *Daddy's Girl* first appeared in serial form in two weekly newspapers.
3 I used the word "autography" here in the sense that Gillian Whitlock uses to define autobiographical comics or graphic memoir in his work *Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of The Comics.*
4 Interview with Debbie Drechsler dated 28/05/2012 as cited in *The Savage Kick Literary Magazine #6* (Norfolk: Murder Slim Press, 2012), 96.
5 Drechsler, 96.
6 Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative And Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 114.
7 Chute, 114.
8 Chute, 114.
9 Chute, 114.
10 Chute,113-114.
11 Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl* (Canada: Fantagraphics Books,1995), 3.
12 Drechsler, 4.
13 Drechsler, 4.
14 Drechsler, 5.
15 Hillary Chute uses the phrase 'Materializing Memory' in her book *Graphic Women* to talk about Linda Barry's comics. My use, of the same phrase, is influenced by Chute. However, I use the term to explain how *Daddy's Girl* gives its author's memories a real, material form.
16 Thomas De Quincey, *The Palimpsest of the Human Brain*, ed. Patrick Madden, December 1, 2006, http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest_of_the_human_brain/.
17 Timothy Dow Adams, in his book *Light Writing and Life Writing,* defines the term 'graphe' in the word'autobiography' as 'marking' rather than 'writing'.
18 Elisabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2012),4.
19 Chute, *Graphic Women*, 114.
20 Laura R Micciche," Seeing and Reading Incest: A Study of Debbie Drechsler's Daddy's Girl," *Rhetoric Review* 23, no.1 (2009): 9, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327981rr2301_1 .
21 Eugène Minkowski, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies,* Trans. Nancy Metzel (USA: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
22 Following Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women*.
23 Laura R Micciche,12.
24 Joseph Witek, "Comics Modes: Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's Dirty Laundry" in *Critical Approaches to Comic: Theories and Methods*, ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (USA: Routledge), 34.
25 Hillary Chute, 10.

26 Following Laura R. Micciche's argument in "Seeing and Reading Incest: A study of Debbie Drechsler's Daddy's Girl.
27 Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7.
28 Drucilla Cornell, 7.
29 Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl,* 31.
30 Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl,* 32.
31 Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 37.
32 Erin Wunker, *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life* (Canada: Book Thug, 2016),100-101.

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Immigration and Conflicted Motherhood: A Comparative Analysis of Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Memoirs of Immigrant Women

Udita Chakraborty

Adrienne Rich writes, "This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between biologically alike bodies, one which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement."[1] For second-generation immigrant women in America, this "unwritten story" composed and conceived between their mothers and themselves, has remained largely absent from the focus of academic research. Their stories of separation, reconciliation, individuation, and fusion with their mothers become the overarching phenomena that persistently affect them throughout their lives. Their memoirs, psychologically and emotionally evocative, provide the readers a glimpse into this "cathexis" that had been disturbed or distorted by immigrating to the United States. This paper therefore, seeks to expound upon the nature of this complex bond as explored by women of Mexican, Rwandan, Vietnamese and Iranian origin in their memoirs and aims at demonstrating how these bonds, though differentiated by their cultural contexts, are united by the issues which reiterate themselves consistently in the mother-daughter relationships of immigrant women.

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* becomes a memoir which, while indicting immigration for the breakdown of the family, also finds the mother guilty of upending the lives of her children. America which is likened to La Llorona—the mystical power which takes away children and never returns them, and referred to as El Otro Lado or the Other Side, plays the role of the antagonist which purloins Grande's immigrant parents with its lures of prosperity and traps them in the snare of the elusive American dream.

The memoir opens with a crisis unfolding in the lives of Reyna and her siblings: that of their mother leaving them to join their father, who has been on the Other Side for eight years trying to earn enough to support the family. As their mother or *Mami* prepares to leave, it becomes increasingly evident to Reyna and her siblings that their *Mami's* departure would eventually amount to an ontological threat for them and would not be an act that would help alleviate their poverty. Since *Mami* had assumed the role of the primary and principal caregiver and nurturer in the absence of their father, with her crossing over to the Other Side, they realized that the last vestiges of security and stability would be wrested away from their world. Even as children, they read into their mother's departure a finality, which signaled to them the end of their relationship with her. Adrienne Rich writes "The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children;"[2] and this memoir explicates the failure of the mother in being the nurturer to her children, especially to her daughters.

As their mother leaves for El Otro Lado, she appoints Mago (the oldest of the siblings) as Reyna and her brother's "little mother",[3] one who would step in to fulfill the role of the primary caregiver in the lives of the children. Though a mere child of eight herself, Mago more than willingly takes up a role that she would go on to fulfill throughout her life. Even though Abuela Evila, the grandmother,

refuses to treat them with the respect and love that they had expected, Mago, rather than detesting the role of the mother to her siblings, grows into it buoyed by her love for them. Throughout the memoir, Grande credits her sister's persistence in supporting them and writes "My mother had asked Mago to be our little mother, and she and my father would have been proud to see how bravely their older daughter had taken on that role . . . Mago was there when my father and mother were not".[4] However, despite Mago's consistent presence, Reyna continues searching for her biological mother, *Mami*. She tries to recreate the image of her mother through associations—in scents, perfumes, and colours, to simulate, in part, the sensations evoked by her mother's body. Jane Flax writes "The mother is, after all, the first love object for the girl as well as the boy. All of us carry the memory of the experience of our mother's body—her softness, smell, comfort. These experiences have an erotic aspect"[5] and soon enough, Grande found herself seeking the comfort of the body of her aunt, Tia Emperatriz, who dispensed, in part, the role of the motherly nurturer. Her yearning for her aunt's body and its comfort not only made her uncomfortable but also made her feel guilty for desiring another woman's body. Because Grande wanted to "snuggle next to her", and desperately wished to ". . . bury [her] face into her hair that smelled of roses"[6] she felt she was betraying her mother, or more importantly thwarting her mother's love. With her increased physical proximity to Tia Emperatriz, she gradually starts forgetting her mother's scent, sound and touch, and even her image and she confesses, "I was forgetting what she looked like, smelled like, felt like. I couldn't remember the sound of her voice, the way she laughed. Every time I closed my eyes to remember, I would hear Tia Emperatriz's laughter. If I took a breath, I would inhale the fragrance of Tia Emperatriz's shampoo that smelled of roses".[7] The fear of losing Tia Emperatriz (newfound mother) as well, prevents Grande from vocalizing her feelings for her and makes her skeptical of forming a bond that would require her emotional participation.

Ironically, it is only after she allows herself to love Tia Emperatriz that her biological mother reappears in their lives, increasing Reyna and her siblings' confusion about their maternal allegiance. When her mother takes her away, Reyna confesses that she had wanted to more than just thank Tia Emperatriz, but the fear of appearing unfaithful to her *Mami* made her walk away without expressing her love to Tia.

The return of their mother however did not restore to them the childhood of security and nurturance that they had missed. Instead, their fear of abandonment intensified with their mother leaving them frequently and repeatedly. Unaccustomed to poverty, *Mami* constantly looked for ways to escape her life—even if that meant abandoning her children. Reyna could sense her mother's desperate desire to leave her children behind, and the nine-year-old Reyna recalls looking at her *Mami* and realizing that "The woman standing there wasn't the same woman who left".[8] For *Mami* who was "... bitter, heartbroken and weighed down by the knowledge that she had four children to support and was on her own"[9] her only possible escape was another man, marrying whom would not only help her financially but would also allow her to vindicate herself as a woman. *Mami's* trysts with her boyfriends, for whom she would leave her children behind, only increased the children's revulsion for her. When she leaves for Acapulco, to accompany her wrestler boyfriend, Grande writes that she found herself "... running to catch up to [her] mother and beg her not to leave [her] for the second time in my [her] life".[10] By her fourth abandonment, Reyna had understood that their desire for their mother's presence was not their love for her, but their fear of being left untended for the rest of their lives. She writes, "We were as Hansel and Gretel. No matter how many times we were abandoned and left to fend for ourselves, we would always follow the crumbs back to Mami".[11] While their mother left them to fulfill her dreams, it was their maternal grandmother Abuela Chinta, who took care of them. Unlike Abuela Evila, she brought them up like her own children and it was in their time spent with her that Reyna

and her siblings located the happiest memories of their childhood.

The last of their mother's desertions was also marked by the replacement of their mother with their father. Even though their father had provided them with the opportunity to live in El Otro Lado, he starved them of the affection they so desperately needed. Alcoholic and abusive, he could hardly be the father that his children had idealized for eight years. Yet Reyna longed to be acknowledged by him and excused his abuse by crediting him for saving her from penury. According to Adrienne Rich, "The woman who has felt unmothered may seek mothers all her life—may even seek them in men"[12] and Reyna in her desperate bid to feel valued, makes her father the center of her life, loving him despite his faults. Her love however finds no reciprocation but ends with Reyna detesting the bond and with her eventually abandoning him. Their stepmother Mila too failed to be their mother. Troubled as she was in her relationships with her children, she never quite emotionally invested in the relationship with her stepchildren. Though not vicious, it was Mila's blatant indifference towards them that antagonized Reyna and her siblings. But Reyna still considered Mila to be a better mother than Mami; Mila did not abandon her own children and neither did she abandon them, although their biological mother had done so multiple times in favour of her boyfriends and other children.

It is only in Dr. Diana Savas, her English teacher in Pasadena College, that Reyna manages to find a real mother. Not only does she shelter Reyna when she had nowhere to go, but she also pushes her into realizing her potential as a writer. Rich opines, "As women we want mothers who want their freedom and ours . . . The quality of the mother's life however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to create a livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities do exist."[13] Dr. Diana Savas, thus, becomes the prototype of the ideal independent mother, as proposed by Rich, who by creating value

in her own life makes Reyna believe that a life without crippling dependency on men is a possibility. Though unmarried and childless she is the one who mothers Reyna into being a fully realized individual, capable of forging a way for herself. Under her tutelage Reyna becomes the first graduate from her family, breaking free from the vicious cycle of indigence perpetuated by the lack of proper education. This relationship marked by the undemanding gentleness of a mother-daughter bond and not by a precarious ambivalence, allows Reyna to achieve her dreams without emotionally crippling her. Therefore, while immigration to the United States denies Reyna the chance of being mothered by her own mother, it also becomes the phenomenon that helps her to gain a mother, whose nurture and care remain unhindered and unrestrained.

THE GIRL WHO SMILED BEADS: A STORY OF WAR AND WHAT COMES AFTER

This search for the mother, however, remains inconclusive for Clemantine Wamariya, who in her memoir, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After* not only provides an unapologetically honest account of the Rwandan Civil War but also undertakes a probe into the psyche of a refugee's struggle for survival with her sister, as she is forced to leave behind all that she had known to be her own.

As the memoir opens Wamariya's recollection of her childhood begins with her description of her home in Kigali. Enveloped in nature, her memories about her home are tinged with a prelapsarian aura. She provides an almost impressionistic representation of her mother's garden which taught her to depend on nature and to seek nurturance from it. This garden which housed an exuberance of flowers and vegetables and provided her paradise-like sanctuary was the Eden of her mother, who herself was like Eve, beautiful and untainted. Clemantine writes "My mother was short and curvy

and regal and poised, with high cheekbones, like grandparents, and bright white teeth with gaps between them, which Rwandans consider beautiful"[14] and by doing so infuses her with the fascination of a child infatuated with her mother. Adrienne Rich comments in her book, "Yet I cannot help but feel that I came to love my own body through first having loved hers, that this was a profound matrilineal bequest"[15] and Wamariya too seems to have first encountered beauty and love in her mother's body and her mother's garden, both of which became to her symbols of fertility, beauty, care, and security.

However, it was not just her biological mother who made claims to her affection. Her nanny Mukamana whom she "loved and adored"[16] though appearing briefly in her life, remained one of the primary nurturers whose love she depended on long after she had left Kigali. Mukamana was her reservoir of unchecked affection, while her mother's affection had to be shared between the other siblings. The stories which Mukamana told her, and often sang to her, provided young Clemantine with a sense of belonging. It allowed her to make sense of the world, while infecting it with the charm of music and happiness. She also harboured a love for Mukamana's body as Mukamana's "long, curly hair"[17] which she wrapped in a "magnificent cloth"[18] captivated her and made her long for her motherly nurture. Since Mukamana fulfilled the role of the caregiver for the first six years of Clemantine's life, the primacy of her attachment with Mukamana became central to the consolidation of Clemantine's identity. Therefore, when Mukamana was replaced by Pascazia, Clemantine detested her simply because Pascazia could neither promise the security nor the fostering strength of Mukamana's stories. Thus, when she had to flee Kigali, she lost the motherly nurture of not one but two mothers.

Her grandmother's house in Butare that she fled to, was only a momentary refuge. Her grandmother, true to her maternal instincts, tried to protect Clemantine and her cousins and Wamariya writes "... my grandmother circled my cousins like a lion, livid, determined

to keep her pride safe and together",[19] adamant to shield the girls from an eventual carnage. But she could not do so for long as Clemantine and her elder sister Claire soon had to escape from Butare and in doing so, had to yield the safety of yet another maternal haven.

Clemantine's relationship with her sister however was marked by a sense of ambivalence. Only fifteen, Claire was forced to assume the role of the mother to Clemantine. While both of them needed to fuse and become a unit to survive in a world that was consistently hostile, Claire repeatedly desired autonomy and freedom from Clemantine, whom she often considered a burden. Wamariya confesses missing her mother several times as she read in Claire's refusal to help her, the rejection of her desire to be loved and nurtured. A fiercely independent woman, Claire could fend for herself and acquired enough autonomy to evade begging for favours. In Burundi, as they lived a sub-human life in refugee camps, only she was enterprising enough to trade and earn. As much as Clemantine admired Claire's resourcefulness, the same admiration often gave way to jealousy. While Claire constantly seemed to be moving forward, Clemantine remained mired in a web of self-pity, plagued by a constant hunger for nurturance and comfort. Clemantine reveals, "Nobody in my world was tender and protective of me anymore. Certainly not Claire"[20] and Claire's refusal to protect and nurture her would always prevent Clemantine from loving her sister completely. Adrienne Rich in her book hails independent mothers, but she acknowledges "... the irony that to fight for her daughter's survival the mother may have to be almost always absent from the child..."[21] and Claire too in her struggle to provide for herself and her sister had to be emotionally distant. Clemantine adds with bitterness, "Claire also didn't care if I was thirsty, exhausted, hungry, hot, despairing, confused or lonely"[22] and that she never expected Claire to "coddle [her]"[23] either.

Yet Clemantine continued searching for maternal figures and it was in Burundi itself that she found Musaza and Mucyechuru who taught her to find comfort in nature again. Mucyechuru which in

Kinyarwanda meant Grandmother, reminded her of her mother as Mucyechuru too demonstrated pride in her appearance by keeping a cloth wrapped around her head and by wearing an orange cape. Musaza or the Grandfather, reminded her of Mukamana as he told her tales which allowed her an escape from her immediate reality. Both of them together taught her how to use stories to soothe herself and how to draw from nature the nurturance which was otherwise denied to her. Since nature and her mother had always been inextricably bound to each other in her consciousness and because stories reminded her of Mukamana, she soon found herself beginning to admire and love Musaza and Mucyechuru. In fact, it was to them that the seven-year-old Clemantine turned when Claire suffered from a near-fatal episode of dysentery. While she wished for Claire to get better, she also subconsciously chose Mucyechuru and Musaza together, as the surrogate mother who would look after her if Claire passed away. When they had to leave Burundi after Claire married Rob, she could not bring herself to say goodbye to Mucyechuru and Musaza as she could not bear another separation from her newfound mother. Therefore, after Claire's marriage, Clemantine constantly felt displaced. Previously used to sleeping beside Claire and clinging on to her for life, Claire's removal to the bridal bed left Clemantine hollow. Consequently, when Claire gave birth to Mariette, Clemantine preoccupied herself with taking care of her in order to fulfill in part, her desire for nurturance and nurturing. Jane Flax in her essay writes, "The wish to have a baby is also a wish to have a mother…One wishes to regress to babyhood and redo the infantile development that is the ultimate source of one's troubles".[24] Sure enough, Wamariya says, "I assigned myself the role of Mariette's eight-year old mother. I carried her everywhere. I fed her whenever she made the slightest noise. I stared at her while she napped".[25] Thus, by caring for Mariette, Clemantine wanted to regress to her childhood and recreate the sense of security that she had lost. Constantly homeless and displaced in her life as a refugee,

Clemantine longed for the security of her haven. But her haven remained elusive as Claire never provided her emotional nurturance. While Clemantine respected Claire's fortitude, she also detested her indifference. Perhaps it was because of Claire's indifference towards her that Clemantine could not emotionally connect to her American mother when they finally arrived in the United States. She felt disconcerted by her American sponsors' propensity to hug and by their free expression of love. According to her, "Taking care of loved ones in [her] world was not based on affection. It was based on the fear of losing them".[26] Starved as she was of affection, she still could not bring herself to love her American mother, because "…Affection still made [her] flinch".[27] Even though her life with her American mother gave her a sense of belonging, it did not provide her with a sense of attachment. As she grew up, she remained suspicious of affection, never allowing herself to form bonds that required her to engage emotionally. Thus, when she was reconciled with her parents, she failed to reincarnate the connection with her mother that she had once lost. The indescribable chasm that had formed between them, variegated by years of separation and trauma, prevented both of them from reaffirming their mother-daughter bond. In place of the reverence that Clemantine had once felt for her mother, she now felt revolted by her dependence on religion. Upon their reconciliation she wanted to pamper her mother to reorder her childhood that had been unceremoniously jeopardized. By undertaking the act of mothering her mother she desired to recover the sense of safety and certainty that she had lost when she was just a child. However, Clemantine soon realized that perhaps the mother-daughter bond which she had been seeking was only a pipe dream which was not to be fulfilled. Even though she was disappointed in her failure to rekindle her relationship with her mother she was "…also old enough to know that when you lose a mother at age six, part of you always remains a child…yearning for her approval and for the false reassurance that she can protect you from the world."[28]

At the end of the memoir her desire to keep structuring her life, to keep track of her time in refugee camps, to codify the events of her life in understandable terms, all become her efforts at regaining the world of unrestrained love and dependability. Immigrating across seven countries until her final arrival in the United States had made her hunt for moorings throughout her life. The disruption of her relationship with her mother, followed by the loss of Mukamana and the consequent nonchalance of Claire towards her, made her desperate to find meaning in life so that she might protect herself from subsequent emotional disintegration.

THE BEST WE COULD DO

Thi Bui in her memoir tries to avert this emotional disintegration caused by an emotionally absent mother. A memoir dealing with the intergenerational conflicts in immigrant families, *The Best We Could Do* delves deep into the psyche of the immigrant mother and the emotionally estranged second-generation Vietnamese American daughter trying to justify a motherless childhood.

Thi Bui's graphic memoir begins with Thi Bui's initiation into motherhood with the birth of her son. The first chapter of the memoir which presents a graphic, albeit discomfiting picture of childbirth introduces the readers to the central theme of the memoir: Bui trying to understand motherhood and the aporias inextricably associated with it. As Bui labours under the emotional and physical anticipation of bringing a child into the world, her mother remains absent, refusing to emotionally engage with her. The longing for her child coincides with the longing for her mother who tries to evade an emotional participation with her daughter in the act of birthing a child.

As she is made to prepare for the birth of her child, Bui is forced to relinquish control over her mind and body. With the epidural injected into her body and an episiotomy performed on her, she realizes for the

first time that she has to surrender her bodily autonomy to the needs of her child. Rather than perceiving this as the natural prerequisite for motherhood, Bui construes it as the decimation of her identity which would make her regress to an infantile consciousness scarred by an emotional disconnect with her mother. As she commences her own motherhood with a longing for a deliberately absent mother, she fears that her capitulation to medical exigencies would force upon her, the repressed desire to be mothered and nurtured herself. She writes, "But if I surrender I'll want a full retreat—to go all the way back to be the baby and not the mother"[29] and Flax purports that women often desire to return to their foetal states to recapture the sense of safety and warmth that they had experienced in their relationships with their mothers.[30] However as she assumes the role of the mother of her child, sympathy for her own mother replaces her longing and latent disappointment in her unavailability. She realizes that the responsibility of rearing a child is "immense"[31] and rather than holding her mother culpable she undertakes a search for reasons for her mother's detachment.

For Bui her relationship with her parents and especially her mother had been a "lonely place"[32] devoid of the warmth of real affection. Bui says that her mother's affection was always shown through her actions and never through her words as for her mother the words ". . . 'I love you' sticks in the throat".[33] As Bui starts navigating her mother's tumultuous past, she understands the reasons which render the articulation of love so taxing a task for her mother. Born in an affluent family, Bui's mother or *Ma* had grown up with a love for education and independence. Her French education had equipped her with a nationalist fervour which made her appreciate Viet Nam's independence from France. However, her zest for freedom was not implemented in her own life, as her marriage to her husband restricted her to a life of dependence. She had hoped for her husband's tuberculosis to eventually consume him leaving her a free widow, but his survival only pushed her into a life of inescapable responsibilities.

Fettered by her marriage, motherhood and its ineluctable demands altered her as a person.

The death of her firstborn became the central incident defining her subsequent relationships with the rest of her children. *Ma* was twenty-one years old when she lost her first child who "...lit up the skies with her smile."[34] Constantly apprehensive of incurring another loss, Bui's mother found it safer to remain distant from her children. Her second child Lan was meant to be a replacement for the child she lost. Bui too was a replacement for another child who was a stillborn. For *Ma* therefore, motherhood was treacherous and emotional proximity to her children meant the possibility of interminable disappointment and pain. Her inability to recover from the loss of two of her children caused her to deliberately disallow herself from expressing love and affection openly and vehemently. Rather she took comfort in maintaining a nuanced distance from her children, under the farce of geniality and good humour. Sara Ruddick opines, "If in the face of danger, disappointment, and unpredictability, mothers are liable to melancholy, they are also aware that a kind, resilient good humor is a virtue...Mothers are tempted to denial simply by the insupportable difficulty of passionately loving a fragile creature in a physically threatening, socially violent, pervasively uncaring, competitive world"[35] and *Ma's* emotional unavailability became in effect, an effort in self-preservation.

However, after relocating to the United States as immigrants and refugees, it was *Ma* who took up the responsibility of providing for her family. In the absence of their mother, Bui along with her brother Tam, found themselves in the care of their father, who was anything but the nurturer and provider that they needed at the time. His offhanded manner of treating them coupled with his temper, only intensified the children's loneliness. Haunted by his own past of inescapable pain, he could never attach himself to the children. Throughout Bui's life, *Ma* remained ensconced in the safety of her

duties, escaping the demanding task of bonding with her children. This deliberate emotional reclusiveness continued into Bui's adulthood and Bui realized that her mother would perhaps always prefer keeping her at a distance. At the end of the memoir, Bui comes to terms with her mother's emotional abandonment. Her own experience of being a parent makes her empathize with her mother and comprehend the choices that she had to make. In fact, while nurturing her child, it was *Ma* whom she tried to emulate as she wished for her mother's raspy voice to soothe her child. When Bui almost lost her son, it was again *Ma* whom she sought out for comfort. The mutual recognition of the mother in each other allowed them to heal the rupture in their relationship. Adrienne Rich writes, "There was, is, in most of us a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defense, a woman's smell, and touch and voice, a woman's strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain"[36] and thus it was her mother that she drew strength from for her own life of mothering.

Having found her mother through her own motherhood, Bui experienced the fear of losing her mother again and this time to old age and malady. Jane Flax claims that if the symbiotic relationship between the mother and the daughter had not been adequately nurturing, the girl child finds it difficult to individuate and separate, which continues even in their adulthood.[37] Thus Bui, who had never quite experienced nurturance from her mother, found it difficult to extricate herself from the longing for her mother. However, as her own motherhood gained precedence, she unlatched herself from her mother and began her journey of individuation.

Her memoir ends with her wish for her son to develop as a distinct entity from herself. Bui's memoir concludes not with an unfulfilled wish of being mothered but with her cognizance of the complexities and variations of motherhood and with the recognition of the mother as an entity with her own desires and difficulties.

FUNNY IN FARSI: A MEMOIR OF GROWING UP IRANIAN IN AMERICA

While Thi Bui's memoir concludes with an assertion of the identity of the mother, Firoozeh Dumas in her memoir *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America,* relegates the mother to the sidelines dismissing her experience as an immigrant in favour of the predominant figure of the father.

A memoir thriving on its wittiness and humour, it does not undertake a serious exploration of motherhood, yet the stark absence of the mother necessitates a study of the character. Firoozeh's Iranian mother, Nazireh, is introduced to the readers as the woman who, because of cultural and societal norms, had been denied an education. Her dream of pursuing midwifery too had to be given up, as circumstances did not permit her the luxury. Married at the age of seventeen, she became a mother within a year and gave up all hopes of ever doing anything in her life which did not revolve around serving her family. When she immigrated to America with her family, she was forced to acclimatize herself to a culture which was vastly different from her own. While she tried to learn the social niceties, her Iranian roots made the process somewhat onerous. However, in the memoir, she is diminished to an entity who repeatedly embarrasses Dumas. Even though Dumas remains sympathetic to her mother's plight, her shortcomings are also used to supply the text with much of its humour. Dumas writes of an incident where her mother had accompanied her to school and had failed to identify Iran on the world map due to her lack of education and had undone the "positive impression",[38] that Dumas had made the previous day. Dumas had decided on that very day itself that in order to save herself from further embarrassment, "her mother would have to stay at home",[39] condemning Nazireh to the domestic sphere which Firoozeh perceived to be one of inactivity and idleness. Anne Morris opines, "When mothers' contributions to their children's lives are barely seen, let

alone valued, it is hardly surprising that other aspects of mothers' lives, which give mothers a presence as people in their own right and which provide a context for understanding their actions, are also invisible to sons and daughters"[40] and Firoozeh's refusal to fully flesh out her mother's character in her memoir stems in part, from the lack of acknowledgment of her mother's contribution to her life. Characterized by her Iranian accent, Nazireh's attempts at reducing her dependence on her daughter to communicate with Americans are also construed as failures. Even though she had tried to learn English from watching game shows on television to Firoozeh it was nothing but "useless information" that she had memorized. Dumas details how Nazireh's English sentences were constructed without verbs and "it" was used to refer to everything. Even if she did manage to speak grammatically coherent English her Persian accent made it obscure and impossible to understand. Her failure at communication, thus, not only made her a nonentity in the public sphere but also rendered her close to invisible in the life of Dumas, whose forays into the outer world were mainly with the aid of her father who had enjoyed the privilege of being educated in America. Praised for her cooking and portrayed as the mother who would watch her children develop from afar, unable to transgress the boundary of the home, Nazireh in the memoir remains the doubly-marginalized voiceless woman. Even though she supports Firoozeh in her marriage to Francois Dumas, her absence in the novel overwhelms this small assertion of her voice. Nazireh, therefore, does not enjoy an affirmation of her identify by her daughter, but the decimation of it, by a conscious denial of her agency.

Adrienne Rich writes, "We are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion and greater complexity, we are both"[41] and the paper explicates the variations in motherhood and mother-daughter relationships among immigrant women. In both *The Girl Who Smiled Beads and The Distance Between Us*, it

is the non-biological mothers who provide strength and courage to their daughters. For Clemantine, it is Claire who shoulders the responsibilities of the mother, but as an imperfect one, she forces Clemantine into a lifelong search for the mother. For Reyna, it is Mago and Dr. Diana Savas who willingly assume the role of the mother. Even though Mago herself remains entrenched in her longing for a mother it is Dr. Diana Savas, an established, independent woman who becomes the source of stability and nurturance that Reyna had craved throughout her life. On the other hand, in the memoirs of Thi Bui and Firoozeh Dumas, the relationship with the physically present mother becomes problematized. While Bui in her memoir, through the experience of her own motherhood identifies her mother as an individual, Dumas wrests away this identity from her own mother by disallowing her distinct voice and agency.

Texts written by immigrant women, therefore become important documents in understanding the psychological and emotional implications which immigration has on motherhood and daughterhood, as they explicate the essential sameness of these experiences across social and cultural milieus.

NOTES

1 Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1995), 225-226.
2 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 223.
3 Reyna Grande, *The Distance Between Us*, (New York: Atria Publishing Group, 2012), chap. 3, Kindle.
4 Grande, *The Distance Between Us*, chap.2.
5 Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 183, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177468.
6 Grande, *The Distance Between Us,* chap. 9.
7 Grande, *The Distance Between Us,* chap. 9.

8 Grande, The Distance Between Us, chap.10.
9 Grande, *The Distance Between Us*, chap.11.
10 Grande, *The Distance Between Us,* chap.12.
11 Grande, *The Distance Between Us,* chap 18.
12 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 242.
13 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 247.
14 Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After,* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2019), chap.1, Kindle.
15 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 220.
16 Wamariya and Weil, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.1.
17 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads*, chap.1.
18 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.1.
19 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.1.
20 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.20.
21 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 247.
22 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads*, chap. 7.
23 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Bea*ds, chap. 5.
24 Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," 180.
25 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap. 5.
26 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.2.
27 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap.4.
28 Wamariya and Weil, *Girl Who Smiled Beads,* chap. 21.
29 Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do,* (New York: Abrams, 2017), 4.
30 Flax, "Conflict", 175.
31 Bui, *Best We Could Do*, 22.
32 Bui, *Best We Could Do*, 39.
33 Bui, *Best We Could Do*, 38.
34 Bui, *Best We Could Do*, 52.
35 Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 351, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177749.
36 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 224.
37 Flax, "Conflict", 175-176.
38 Firoozeh Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America,* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback, 2003), chap.1, Kindle.
39 Dumas, *Funny in Farsi*, chap.1.
40 Anne Morris, "Naming Maternal Alienation", in *Motherhood: Power & Oppression,* eds. Andrea O'Reilly, Marie Porter, and Patricia Short, (Toronto: Women's Press, 2006), 230.
41 Rich, "Motherhood and Daughterhood", 253.

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