



# Final Draft

The YIF Critical Writing Journal

Issue 5 | May 2024



Copyright © Young India Fellowship, Ashoka University, 2024

All facts, opinions and ideas expressed in the works of writing published in Final Draft are solely the personal statements of the respective authors. While Ashoka University stands for and advocates academic freedom, and freedom of speech and expression, the views and opinions of the authors are not the views and opinions of Ashoka University as an institution.

Authors are responsible for all content, including checking the accuracy of the facts and statements, for getting permissions and consent for wherever applicable, and for following proper citational practices to reference and credit resources and data used by them. Ashoka University disclaims any liability of violations of other parties' rights, or any damage incurred as a consequence to use or apply any of the contents of this publication. Authors confirm that the material that they have submitted to Final Draft is original and not published or submitted for publication elsewhere. They also confirm that these works of writing will not be submitted to or published in any other publications, before they have been published in this journal. Once it has been published in Final Draft, authors may submit and publish it elsewhere. In case any of the pieces in this publication are submitted to other publications, Final Draft will be cited as the original source of publication. Authors grant Ashoka University the right to use their name, resume, image, likeness, and biographical material, as well as parts or all of the manuscript for all advertising, promotion, and other publication purposes.

**Proofreading:** Fuzail Siddiqi and Ankita Prasad

**Cover Design, Artwork, Typesetting and Layout:** Sakshi Mundada

# Final Draft

Issue 5 - May 2024

# Acknowledgements

Producing Final Draft is always a team effort and Issue #5 is no exception. It is with gratitude and pleasure, therefore, that we thank: Aniha Brar, Dean, Young India Fellowship and Vice Chancellor's Office, for her vision and support for the Critical Writing programme; Karan Bhola, Director, Young India Fellowship, for his deep interest in writing at the YIF; the YIF Team, and in particular, Tejasvini S, for providing continuous and indispensable assistance on matters big and small; Anuja Sinha, Percy Bharucha, Shahambare T, Mahima Pahuja and Somnath Chakraborty for helping us with pre-launch publicity; Akash Rawal for his support with printing and finances; Chiranjit Mahato and Rakesh Meitei for their valuable operational and logistical support. We would also like to thank Sakshi Mundada, our designer, for her thoughtful engagement with the Critical Writing faculty and the essays as she produced the wonderful final images and the journal layout; Fuzail Siddiqi and Ankita Prasad for proofreading the manuscript at a rapid pace.

And to the Young India Fellows, whose writing and spirit animate the Critical Writing programme, this issue is dedicated to you.

# Editorial Board Members

## *YIF Writing Faculty*

Sayan Chaudhuri

Krishtijeet Das

Ananya Dasgupta

Harshvardhan Siddharthan

# Contents

About the Journal	I	Unravelling the Challenges of HIV-AIDS Awareness Campaigns in Nepal through a Language Lens	62
Designer's Note	2	<i>Aayushma Adhikari</i>	
Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Reading Spaces and Objects in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"	4	The Normalization of Rape: Interrogating State Impunity in the Bilkis Bano Case	71
<i>Tejasvini S</i>		<i>Anseena</i>	
Happy Hour	24	Something in the Water: Water and Madness in "Dream of the Golden Mahseer"	86
<i>Sonakshi Grover</i>		<i>Mukul Bhatt</i>	
Integrally A-Part: Labour that Sustains a Premises	40		
<i>Raunaq Saraswat</i>			



“The whole language of writing for me is  
finding out what you don’t want to know,  
what you don’t want to find out.  
But something forces you to anyway”

James Baldwin

## About the Journal

The YIF Critical Writing Programme has few visible contextual precedents within the Indian higher education system. Acknowledging the importance of writing as central to processes of knowledge acquisition, production, and consumption, the programme has developed a pedagogy geared towards building critical reading, writing and thinking skills to help Fellows engage with the world of ideas and enable them to develop and express their own ideas in a well-reasoned, lucid, and engaging manner. We do this by helping students innovate with genres of writing across different disciplines to develop a metacognitive awareness regarding their own reading and writing practices. These skills act as building blocks for the liberal arts education they receive at Ashoka University and enhance their abilities to navigate academic, professional, and social spheres once they graduate from the Fellowship.

The goal of Final Draft is to showcase both the range—in topic and genre— and strength of writing in a student body that is itself highly diverse in terms of its educational, disciplinary, professional, geographic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through the process of writing multiple drafts, student-authors discover their own unique voice, and recognise writing as an ongoing, open-ended activity as signalled by the title of the journal itself. As the Fellows learn to bring critical thinking tools to the drawing board, readers of Final Draft can witness a clear attempt by them to negotiate with texts and social phenomena as they make sense of the world around them.

# Designer's Note

The Final Draft Issue #5 uses illustration and design to showcase, not just the refined final pieces of writing, but also the year long process of immersion in critical writing and thinking that have produced them. These are messy, constantly evolving images, rough around the edges, reflecting the nature of this engagement.

To depict this intensive journey in three illustrations, I have broken down a rather complex arc of engagement into three parts—overwhelm, revelation and redirection. Most fellows, especially the authors of these papers have felt similar feelings in their journey of critical writing and thinking.

To illustrate these complex emotions, specifically in the context of critical thought, I started with the motif of the 'panopticon', which according to philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bethlam, is the perfect prison, a structure of control and authority. The overwhelm felt on uncovering the power structures that govern our everyday lives, the sense of revelation felt on studying ways of subversion that allow for life to go on in these structures, and the hope for a redirection that critical thought leaves us with, are all presented in these set of illustrations.

The cover is then both a culmination and manifestation of this journey as it imagines a space beyond the confines of the power structure where tenderness, vitality and hope can exist.

# Class of 2023



# Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Reading Spaces and Objects in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Tejasvini S

From being a science student in school to a law aspirant to an accidental literature student, Tejasvini has found her nonlinear academic journey quite heartening. She completed her Bachelor's and Master's in English literature from Stella Maris College in Chennai. She considers literature to be the scaffolding that holds her together. Tejasvini aspires to mindfully contribute to academia through teaching. Her research interests include Spatiality, Medieval Tamil literature (Sitṛilakiyam), Social history of literary forms, Material culture and object studies, Indian literatures along with writings from Eelam and Sri Lanka.

Often a person of afterthought, Tejasvini is a staunch homebody, who likes to cook while listening to the songs of her holy trinity—Ilaiyaraja, Harris Jayaraj and A.R. Rahman. She also loves listening to Turkish music, especially the ones of Kaan Boşnak, Sezen Aksu and Bengü. She feels enlivened by essays and thinks them to be her most preferred and enjoyable form of literature. An avowed dosa stan, she also savours picture books for children. Despite her aversion to pun-eer, puns order her reality.

One need not be a  
chamber—to be haunted—  
One need not be a House—  
The Brain—has Corridors  
surpassing  
Material Place—  
(Emily Dickinson 407)

Emily Dickinson's lines in the epigraph imagine the brain as having hallways that are more haunting than a literal chamber or a house. What is striking about these lines is how they articulate the mind as a house that stirs memories and emotions in spatial terms. How often do we understand and think about the world spatially? What does spatial thinking mean, and what does it look like? Be it Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's famous feminist work *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Kate Chopin's “*The Story of an Hour*”, or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, what is it about rooms, staircases, and attics that have made them central to the literary imagination of their times?

This paper explores these questions and is invested in thinking

about the spatial relations and paradoxes in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). This exploration takes on a tripartite structure in this paper. The first part looks at how the home is a conglomeration of different spaces in the story, revealing the nexus of power relations that construct, sustain, and reinforce oppressive patriarchal structures. The second part analyses the interaction between spaces and objects in the story to see how they contribute to the subjectivity and resistance of the protagonist. The third part examines how language and writing feature in the spatial scheme of these stories. For this purpose, the paper primarily draws from literary and anthropological sources to scaffold its arguments.

Despite being a central part of sociopolitical and literary life right from medieval times, the idea and the space of the home became most notable in 19th-century Victorian England. In tracing the history of the housewife, the Marxist feminist scholar Catherine Hall highlights how

families in pre-industrialised societies were a self-sustaining economic unit wherein domestic work had a broader definition and more productive role than it did in industrial societies.

After the Industrial Revolution, women became less associated with production itself and more with creating and sustaining the conditions for production as the home or family unit shifted from being the centre of production to a site of consumption (Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*).

Commenting on the significance of the home in 19th-century Victorian culture, the literary scholar Nicola Humble cites the following reasons for the centrality of domesticity in such a cultural imaginary. She says:

The rise of the evangelical movement, with its emphasis on quiet, domestic virtues; the improving child mortality rates, which produced an increasingly child-centred culture; the big changes brought about by industrialization, which separated home from

workplace and the related expansion of the suburbs that meant that many middle-class men worked at some distance from their homes. The middle-class Victorian woman lived increasingly apart from the arena of work, her role as domestic doyenne bolstered by any number of texts selling her the image of herself as “the angel of the hearth”. (220)

American society drew immensely from Victorian political and cultural imaginations of the ideal woman and the home. Capitalism and industrialisation played a pivotal role in the formalisation of labour that increasingly estranged women from the workplace, resulting in the gendered demarcation of the home and the workplace, as well as the private and the public. A nascent industrial capitalism produced and intensified this spatial divide—middle-class white households employed domestic workers from the working class, ushering in newer forms of

luxury, idleness, and leisure for the women who were interned at home. Their staying at home as the “angel of the hearth” (Humble 220) and not venturing into public spaces was seen as a metric of their father or husband’s success. The woman, then, was relegated to the sphere of the home and was responsible for its moral and physical upkeep. The home was seen by men as a necessary haven against their hustle in a rapidly urbanising industrialised society.

Literature, especially women’s writing in the 19th century, focussed on the space of the home as one of its central subjects. Spatiality as a theme and the home as a motif found memorable expressions in the writings of notable authors from this period such as George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, the Bronte sisters, and Gilman, among others. Moreover, there was a surge in magazines and manuals on the idea of an ‘ideal home’, along with self-help books and etiquette manuals for upwardly mobile middle-class women on how to decorate and aestheticise the home. In fact, a focus on aesthetics, particularly of the

domestic, also grew from medical and scientific concerns over the effects of home décor on mental and physical health. Wallpapers, carpets, furniture, and other objects were considered indispensable for the moral and spiritual health of the home, particularly of children. Wallpaper patterns were the subject of hot debates as they were seen as possible threats to the wellness of a family. For instance, the design scholar Jan Jennings quotes the editor of *Harper’s Bazar*, who, in 1876, suggested that “Indiana divorce laws may be perhaps directly traced to some frightful inharmoniousness in wall-paper” (196). Such conversation around the aesthetics of the home was also buoyed by the advent of printing machinery that made wallpapers affordable and the most preferred form of home décor.

This paper reads “The Yellow Wallpaper” against this background. Set in a colonial mansion in the late 19th century, the short story dramatises an unnamed female narrator’s experiences and the consequences of her spatial and social



confinement. The unnamed narrator is diagnosed with neurasthenia and is coerced into a brief life of absolute rest cure in a room devoid of any stimulants, including writing, by her physician-husband, John. The lack of agency and mobility, along with claustrophobia, makes her hyper-fixate on the wallpaper in the room, which gradually leads to her descent into madness. Furthermore, she strongly believes that she has seen a woman trapped behind the wallpaper—a claim her husband dismisses as a dangerous fantasy. Her pursuit to free the trapped woman reaches a climax with her creeping across the room, biting the nailed bedstead, tethering herself to the bed with an invisible rope, and finally tearing away the wallpaper, much to the horror of her husband. Contrary to the pathologised readings of the narrator's oppression in "The Yellow Wallpaper", this analysis attempts to engage with and interrogate commonsensical understandings of power and madness' through their interrelation with spaces and objects in the story.

### Thinking of the Home, *from the Home*

The domestic space like no other generates and visualises desire and control. (Pflaumer 21)

In Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", the unnamed narrator-protagonist, along with her husband John, arrives at a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (Gilman 647) for the summer to recover from a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (648), which could also indicate her postpartum depression. She is advised bed rest by her husband John and her brother, both of whom are doctors of "high standing", and is strictly advised against writing or doing anything but resting in the room and eating meals on time (648). The narrator has a paradoxical relationship with the room she inhabits as it is not the room of her choice. She expresses to John her wish to stay downstairs in the room that "opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings" (648). However, John insists that the room

upstairs best suits her recovery and well-being.

The narrator's disdain towards and unease regarding the room continues as she finds its interiors deeply unsettling. She shares an ambivalent relationship with the room—she calls it "the most beautiful place" as it is a "big, airy room with sunshine galore" and appreciates its distance from the village but qualifies it immediately by saying that its emptiness and strangeness bothers her (Gilman 648). She gives an unpleasant, ominous description of the floor as well by calling it "scratched and gouged and splintered" (650). Out of everything, she abhors the mouldy yellow wallpaper as she finds it intolerable, repulsive, and horrid with its "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (648). She requests that the walls of the room be re-papered, but John assures her that the room is salutary to her and forbids her from thinking about the room as there was "nothing worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies" (649).

The narrator's intrigue about the

wallpaper intensifies as she follows its patterns. She claims to see a woman trapped and creeping behind the wallpaper every night. She follows the woman's movements every day and feels that the former will always remain invisible to anybody but her. On one such day when John is away—she locks the room, throws the key outside, creeps across the room, tears down the wallpaper, bites off a corner of the nailed bedstead and finds the room exhilarating to such an extent that she says: "It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! I don't want to go outside" (Gilman 656). She attempts to 'free' the woman lurking behind the wallpaper and on the last day of their stay in the mansion, the narrator locks the room and peels massive yards of the wallpaper. In the end, after desperate pleas to unlock the door, a horrified John opens the door to see the narrator, who, at this point, speaks in a voice that is indistinguishable from the entrapped woman behind the wallpaper. She says, "I've got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back" (656).

In the late 19th century, the health of the home was most often equated with the health of the family, and women were tasked with the labour of ensuring the same. However, “The Yellow Wallpaper” exposes the flawed nature of this norm by asking: Do women get to access all parts of the home? Do all women get to access all parts of the home? Are homes apolitical spaces? If so, for whom? The exposition of the story establishes a history of oppression—the narrator’s home is a “colonial, ancestral mansion”. The woman that the narrator claims to see behind the wallpaper need not merely be a reflection of her suppressed Self but could also be read as the collective consciousness of the women who had previously occupied the room and shared similar experiences. The history of the room that the narrator speculates upon supports this argument. She says:

It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the wall. The paint and paper look as

if a boy’s school had used it (Gilman 648).

This history is significant because it debunks the notional idea of a homogeneous and positivist experience of home. For instance, a gymnasium is where the body is disciplined and shaped to be kept in ‘good’ health. However, it becomes a gendered and unjust place because it fosters good health in men and becomes a site of deteriorating health for women (the narrator). Similarly, the nursery is indicative of the position of the narrator per se—she crawls like an infant, is infantilised by her husband, and is taken care of. Given its structure with barred windows, nailed bedstead, and the apparently curative purpose for which the narrator is assigned that room, it is highly likely that the room was used as a “place of medical control, surveillance, and confinement” (Brannigan 158).

Similarly, her confinement in the room upstairs illustrates how homes produce and replicate social relations connected to the outside world. The staircase connecting the

two floors is used only by John and Jennie (John’s sister), and once the narrator is locked in the room, she does not use it as she is forbidden to move to any space other than the room. The room here is private and closed off from the public-facing spaces of the home, like the living room. One of the reasons why John insists on not taking the room downstairs is because that would increase the possibility of shame and stigma for him. This is also why he constantly reassures the narrator of her good health and calls her condition temporary. By confining her upstairs, he is seen as eliminating chances of a public display of his wife’s ‘madness’, which would threaten his social standing as a physician of a high reputation. It maintains a facade of normalcy while successfully guarding John’s social capital.

The upstairs is also noteworthy because it brings together issues of race, class, and gender. The fact that the narrator is a middle-class white woman from a family of reputed physicians has secured her a place upstairs with a view of the outside

(albeit a small part). This raises the following questions: If they were a non-normative, non-white female person, would they have had access to the attics and rooms upstairs and inside of homes? Who gets to access the home fully? Who is the “living room” for? As demonstrated here, the home constantly reverberates with the histories and memories of its previous occupants. The narrator’s experience of the room is heavily mediated by the interior makeup of the room and, by extension, the lives of its earlier occupants. It also serves as a repository of sociopolitical histories as opposed to the patriarchal notion of it being an apolitical space of refuge and spirituality.

### Unsettling Things: Objects and Spaces

Places and things bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts, which can then reveal the layers of meaning they contain.

—Nadia Seremaktis (qtd. in



Doolittle 249)

The cultural anthropologist Nadia Seremaktis, while commenting on the dynamic nature of objects, talks about how objects are agential in that they are carriers of histories and affect, which can in turn bring about action in people. What is powerful about this observation is that it moves beyond the simplistic binary of a subject–object relationship in indicating how objects can creatively construct subjectivities as well. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the wallpaper serves to highlight a spatial paradox. It is the very object that repels the narrator the most, with its patterns considerably contributing to her unrest while also galvanising the narrator’s agency against her confinement. In her initial observations about the wallpaper, she notes:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly

commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (Gilman 648).

Even in her subsequent descriptions of the wallpaper and the feelings it evokes in her, she talks about the wallpaper in ominous terms—as one that is menacing, disgusting, and ghastly. After a certain point, she begins to hyper-fixate on the wallpaper’s patterns and almost personifies it: “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (649). She constantly feels overwhelmed by its presence in the room, especially after she begins believing that a woman skulks behind the wallpaper.

However, there is a marked turn in her attitude towards the wallpaper when John is away from home. That is the first time in the story that she is seen moving out of the room, and in the subsequent lines, she says that she is beginning to grow fond of the room, not in spite of the wallpaper, but because

of the wallpaper (Gilman 650). John’s distance from the home not only gives her time “outside” the room but also allows her to understand and see the wallpaper, and by extension, herself, in an unmediated fashion. The wallpaper, which was until then seen as apart from her, almost becomes an extension of her.

The anthropologist Zoe Crossland’s idea of “dependent biography” (qtd. in Sahana 343) is useful in shedding light on this interaction between the narrator and the wallpaper. Crossland talks about the interwoven agency between women and the material objects that they come into contact with. She notes:

[Clothes worn by women] serve as “artefacts” that are “extensions of the body”. By expanding the locus of this embodiment to include domestic objects that women come into contact with creates interwoven agency between them and their possessions. (qtd. in Sahana 342)

The yellow wallpaper, in this case, becomes an extension of the narrator and can be seen as an integral part of her biography per se.

The wallpaper expresses the narrator’s agency and resistance, thus moderating her interactions with other objects in the room. The form of the narrative is suggestive of this agency. Most sections in the story end with her feeling scared of someone finding out about her secret, solitary pursuits—either of her writings or her conjectures about the wallpaper: “There comes John, and I must put this away, —he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 649); “There’s sister on the stairs!” (650); “I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here” (652). However, once she resolves not to let anybody but herself discover the mystery of the woman behind the wallpaper, she experiences the room quite differently. She finds it fascinating, has synaesthetic experiences, and even begins to notice the room’s textures. For instance, she talks about the “yellow smell” of the room and how it creeps all over the house and even

enters her hair (654). The assertion of the narrator's knowledge of the wallpaper, her eventual tearing down of it, along with the 'freeing' of the confined woman behind it, collectively add to the creation of her agency and subjectivity.

The door of her room operates in an identical fashion. Initially, the narrator feels entrapped in the room as John has imposed a strict order for her to stay put in the room and strives hard to move out of it. The room is opened and closed not from within but from the outside. However, when the narrator gains some agency through her changed relationship with the wallpaper, she locks herself in and throws the key out of the window. The way she utilises the space of the room entirely changes; the text shows her increased movement in the room—she runs across the room, peels off the wallpaper, and even wants to jump out of the window (Gilman 655–656). The dreadful door, towards the end, becomes a “beautiful door” (656).

Why are these transformations important? How do they add to the spatial understanding of the text?

How could something as common as a wallpaper and a door invest agency and expose power relations? And why are these objects unsettling? One of the reasons why the wallpaper would have haunted the narrator is because it brings together past histories and future desires—of the narrator, the woman behind the wallpaper, and perhaps, the room's previous occupants. As illustrated earlier, the narrator's changing relationship with the objects in her room drastically changes her experience of that space and how she utilises it as well. As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze notes, we almost always are interested in perceiving things or images by “virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands, therefore normally perceiving only clichés” (qtd. in Thoburn 208). Only when the mundane and familiar objects are defamiliarised do they bring to the fore invisible connections with structures of power. Furthermore he says:

A politics of the object  
must breach clichéd  
patterns of perception and

action to allow “the thing in itself” to come forth, in all its “inexhaustible”, “unbearable” and “intolerable” excess. (qtd. in Thoburn 208)

Both as a narrative technique and as a consequence of the narrator's spatial confinement, these objects undergo a shift in their significance, prompt a reorientation of perception in the narrator, and evocatively show the readers the underlying reasons for the narrator's 'madness' and resistance.

### Paper-ing the Narrative: Language and Spaces

The very essence of suppression, as Freud defines, is a “failure of translation”—a boundary separating us from the language we feel as foreign and which we try to translate  
—Nataša Polgar (64–65)

In scholarly interpretations of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the woman behind the wallpaper is often seen as a reflection of the narrator's

suppressed emotions. What does it mean to read this statement in the context of this epigraph? How do language and translation feature in spatial discourse? Throughout the story, there is a noticeable gap in comprehension between the narrator and her husband, John. Despite the narrator's multiple attempts to convey her emotions and experiences of the room, John almost always dismisses them as her fancies. He does not share her experience of the room and insists that the narrator follow a prescribed routine to feel better. For instance, when the narrator tells John that the room is not favourable for her well-being, the former says:

Why, Darling! Our lease  
will be up in three weeks,  
and I can't see how to leave  
before.[...] Of course if you  
were in any danger, I could  
and would, but you really  
are better, dear, whether  
you can see it or not. I am  
a doctor, dear, and I know.  
(Gilman 652)

To this, when the narrator retorts by saying that she was,

perhaps, only improving bodily. John responds in the patronising language of medical well-being and motherhood. He says:

I beg of you, for my sake  
and for our child's sake, as  
well as your own, that you  
will never for one instant  
let that idea enter your  
mind! There is nothing so  
dangerous, so fascinating,  
to a temperament like  
yours. It is a false and  
foolish fancy. Can you not  
trust me as a physician  
when I tell you so? (652)

As can be seen here, there are two varying languages. John urges the narrator to trust his knowledge and “diagnosis” of her, while the narrator finds it difficult to articulate her experiences against the force of this medical-filial discourse. His medical language neither legitimises nor allows any space for the narrator's experiences. It is useful to turn to Polgar, who makes an apt observation on how women's language is manipulated in medical discourses:

In the gap between the

two languages, between two discourses—that of the psychiatrist and that of the female patients—an “empty space” appears. Here the codes belonging to different languages are juxtaposed; however, this interaction does not engender understanding but results in establishing one discourse as the dominant and suppressing, displacing the other outside the language of “normality”. (64–65)

The narrator's spatial confinement is an outcome of her linguistic confinement—her madness and ill-health are constructed, sustained, and reinforced through John's medical language.

Furthermore, the narrator is strictly advised against writing, as imagination is seen as a serious impediment to her recovery. However, notably, she reclaims her agency and subjectivity only through the paper—both by tearing down the wallpaper that stifles her and by writing her story

that foregrounds her experiences and resistance. She regains her voice through the paper(s) and resists the medical-filial metanarrative from subsuming her experiences. The form of the short story itself could be seen as indicative of the spatial paradox in “The Yellow Wallpaper”—although the boundedness of the short story heightens her sense of confinement, it also documents her ‘release’.

### Conclusion

As demonstrated thus far, spaces embody, reproduce, intervene, and, at times, even defy social hierarchies. Contrary to their perceived fixity, spaces are always already interacting with each other as well as with objects and temporalities within and outside of them. In this paper, the spatial reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” problematises received understandings and associations of the home and collapses the patriarchal binary of public and private while also enabling imaginations of different ways of being within constricting conditions.

How private or public one's

home is, or where one stands in this negotiation between the public and the private, is telling of one's sociopolitical locations. The multiple turns of meaning in the depiction of spaces in the story show how homes are places of simultaneity—a carefully engineered semiotic field with every object or material contributing to the occupants' negotiation of confinement and agency. Reading spatiality as a narrative technique also alerts us to the exclusionary conception of spaces and asks us to scrutinise deceptively monolithic categories to see the uneven power dynamics that undergird them. For instance, “The Yellow Wallpaper” shows how working-class women or women of colour are excluded from the imaginary and actual space of the home and its interiors, while middle-class white women gain access at the cost of the former's freedom.

Furthermore, a spatial exploration of the text also highlights how apparently



non-material aspects like language construct and scaffold oppressive structures. The narrator's first place of entrapment is language, from which she cannot free herself, even till the end of the story. Medical documents in the 19th century considered women's narratives to be insignificant and unreliable, so psychiatrists chose to either neglect them or paraphrase them in a third-person narrative (Polgar 64). The narrator's spatial destiny is a direct derivative of John's medical discourse that he periodically evokes to regain a sense of security and to justify patriarchy's need to surveil and cement boundaries for women.

As demonstrated through the three frameworks in this paper, a braided reading of spaces and objects in "The Yellow Wallpaper" highlights the constructed nature of madness and the conditions of its production and experience. The complete disorder of the room and its objects in the climax debunks the supposed incompatibility between madness and the home. The narrator's madness is not due to any uncontrollable

external factors but results from social codes being asserted and repeatedly reinforced at home. Ultimately, the everydayness of madness that stems from and surfaces on the objects and spaces in the story upturns the common notion of madness as an atypical socio-psychological experience.

## Works Cited

- Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Palgrave, 1998.
- Dickinson, Emily. "One need not be a chamber—to be haunted." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: A Reading Edition*, edited by R.W. Franklin, Harvard University Press, p. 407, 2005, [https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Dickinson\\_Chamber.pdf](https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Dickinson_Chamber.pdf) . Accessed 4 Mar. 2024
- Doolittle, Megan. "Time, Space, and Memories: The Father's Chair and Grandfather Clocks in Victorian Working-class Domestic Lives." *Home Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2011, pp. 245–264.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *National Library of Medicine*. pp. 647–656. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf> Accessed 10 Apr. 2024.
- Hall, Catherine. *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*, Polity Press, 1992.
- Humble, Nicola. "Domestic Arts." *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, edited by Francis O'Gorman, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.219–235.
- Jennings, Jan. "Controlling Passion: The Turn-of-the-Century Wallpaper Dilemma." *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1996, pp. 243–64. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215237>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.
- Pflaumer, Valerie. *Haunted Houses, Haunted Selves – Feminist Readings of Uncanny Domesticity: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shirley Jackson and Francesca Woodman*. 2022. University of Potsdam, PhD Dissertation. <https://d-nb.info/1279706821/34> Accessed 14 Feb. 2024.
- Polgar, Nataša. "Female Madness and the Feminine Monstrous: Genre as Confinement and Genre as Affective Repository." *Narrative Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2021, pp. 58–81, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/784328/pdf> . Accessed

17 Feb. 2024.

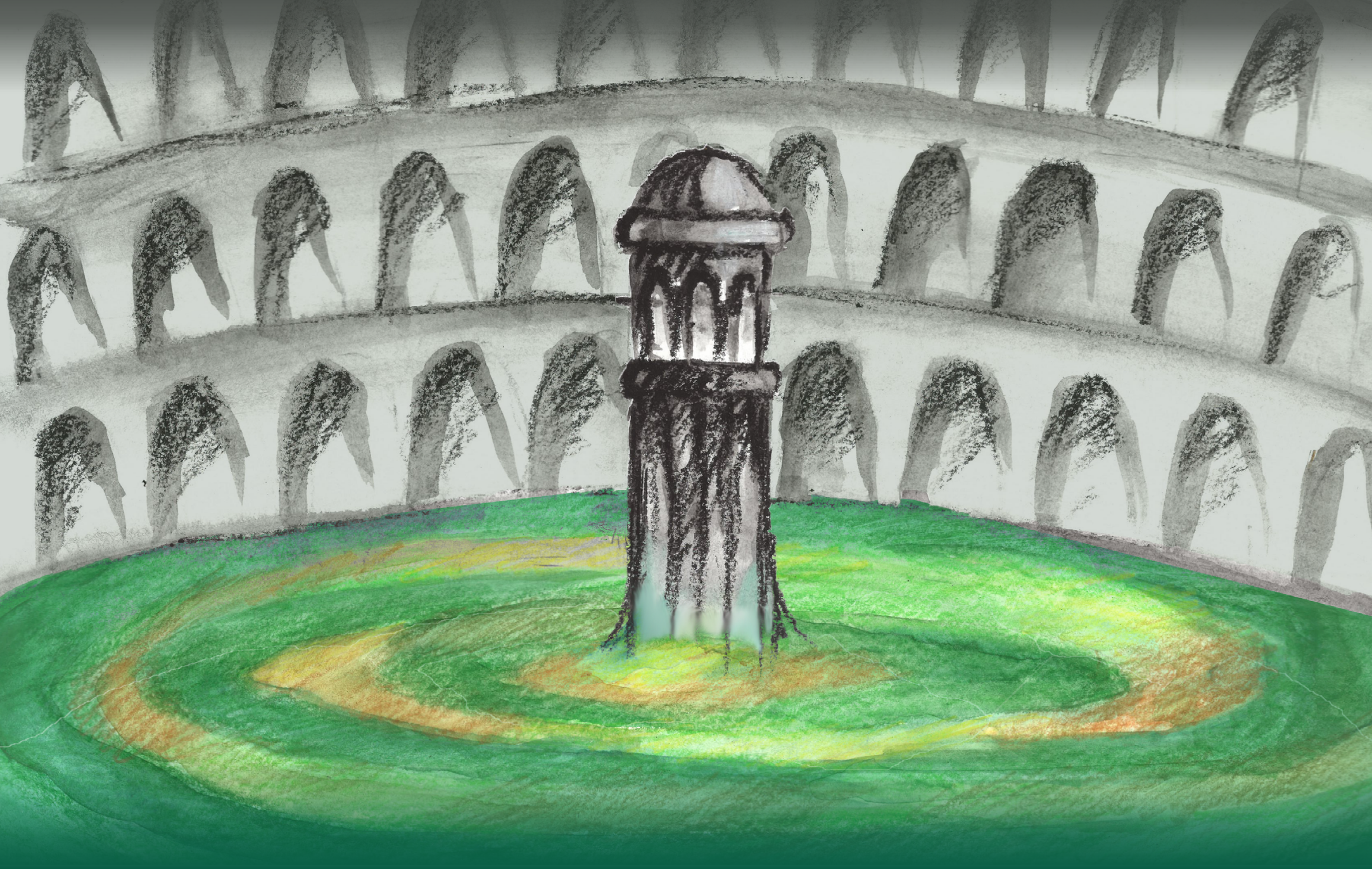
Sahana, Sheelalipi. "Object as Subject: Material Agency in Ismat Chughtai's 'The Quilt' and 'Chhoti Apa.'" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2022, pp.336–348, doi: 10.1080/17449855.2021.2014348.

Thoburn, Nicholas. "Useless Objects: Commodities, Collection and Fetishes in the Politics of Objects". *Objects and Materials: A Routledge Companion*. Routledge, 2014, pp.208-217.

#### Illustration 1: Overwhelm

It is when the power structure/s that govern your life are made visible to you, their machinations made understandable, a sense of overwhelm takes over.







# Happy Hour

## Sonakshi Grover

Asymmetries in relations captured Sonakshi's intrigue in texts and observations since she was a little girl. Her academic journey from Economics, to the YIF and now to Development Studies at Oxford University has been marked by a stark academic and personal maturation. She found solace in feminist literature as a child, and now increasingly relies on ethnographic works to understand reality and investigate its dynamics with humility and a beginner's mindset. Her paper looks at one particular stage of her exploration. It uncovers how values of justice and equality throw into relief power asymmetries, wherein gender is one axis of imbalance.

Sonakshi is now cognizant of the limits of analysing a social problem with a fictional write-up. Bottom-up research increasingly emphasises the relevance of probing values of care and love from a perspective of agency. A perspective that is neither valorising nor rejecting, but one that captures that nuance in which negotiations of everyday life occur. The words in the text are limited, and the women (mothers) speak less. The essay following the write-up analyses the imbalances of gender and class but also consciously highlights the unanswered questions that we continue to pursue. This text is imperfect and incomplete, and frames questions that she presently investigates.

This piece is organised in two parts. Part I is a fictional story tracing the observations of an early teenager on an ordinary evening at home. Part II is a critical reflection exercise that situates the story in Part I in academic debates on kinship, gender, and the domestic division of labour.

### Part I

#### Happy Hour

Evenings at home sound like happiness: the air, a cacophony of movie references, leg-pulling, character imitations, and childhood anecdotes. Some blaring music or comedy show resound on the mega TV screen. In the dining room—so empty at noon but now bustling with the crowd of all 10 of us—everyone is doing their separate chores yet acting together. Chacha and Papa are organising the drinks.

I watch them meticulously measure whiskey in the cup I do not know the official name for and pour beer skillfully with a tilted glass. Alcohol discussions were never forbidden.

My father told me, "Tilt gives the beer its best foam."

I am usually accompanied by a book—I mostly read for pleasure, whilst also not being able to resist the temptation of sitting together.

My brother is trying to decide what the family should watch, with Tayaji navigating the remote. Of course, since he joined the family business, my brother is invited to the table before they begin. Little Arnav and Muffin are playing games and making noise in the background.

At the happy hour, the house comes together to help give a relaxing break to the hard-working members of the day. After all, they just came home from work.

From the kitchen, we can smell the scent of peanuts being roasted in olive oil and hear the air fryer grilling healthy potato wedges. If you walk to its door with an empty plate needing refills, you see one of the mothers at the stove readying the seventh dish for dinner—someone just said they aren't in the mood to have the first six after their hectic day. It's

hot, and there is sweat and tension in the kitchen. A call comes from the living room for some chips. A distinctive call—loud, demanding, and authoritative. After all, they just came home from work.

As the drinks go down, the laughter gets louder, with jokes becoming heated debates. “It’s not maid; it’s house help,” my brother interjects in a riotous debate.

The three ladies emerge from the kitchen, reminding them to close for dinner.

“It’s 11:30!” they say.

We pride ourselves on waiting up for each other and eating together.

As the happy family sits, the mothers stand and serve the elaborate buffet. I start to notice her absence from the table when the food is warm. Her face looks tired, and she would by now require quiet and sleep. Yet she stands and smiles as I devour the leg piece and gesture at its marvellous taste.

She picks a plate to eat when the day and the salad are over. She

walks around the table, serving herself whilst the men enjoy the cushioned chairs placed right across the TV.

Should they get up? After all, they just came home from work.

I reduce the TV volume, aware that it is loud for her migraine sensitivities. I suggest that we can get a small plate of salad for them. I insist she take my chair. I try to make conversation and lighten her spirits. But can I give her the appreciation and respect she deserves from the rest?

They are out of topics to discuss and begin criticising their meal.

“Who made this today?”

“I did,” she says.

I watch her look down and continue to finish her meal, swallowing what’s left of the dal and her self-esteem.

After all, they just came home from work.

It’s past midnight by the time everyone gets up to go to sleep. The new burn on her wrist, the swollen ankle, and the frozen shoulder are no

big deal.

“We ought to cut back the drinking time,” I say.

“But it’s the HAPPY hour!” the men exclaim.

She sighs, continuing to rub that stubborn mark left by her special turmeric chutney. You can hear the clinking of steel plates and the running water flowing over used whiskey glasses. It’s hot, and there is sweat and resignation in the kitchen at this hour.

After all, she has yet to go/come home from work every single day.

## Part II

### Critical Reflection

“Happy Hour” makes transparent the gendered responsibilities and entitlements displayed in an ordinary evening at home. The story’s representation of the unequal division of domestic labour, its repercussions for women’s health, and the culture of inclusion-exclusion in a joint family system speaks to contentious debates in economics, anthropology, law, and feminist praxis. As a critical reflection exercise, this essay analyses debates

on domestic labour embodied in and initiated by “Happy Hour”. In Section 1, the essay analyses the household described in “Happy Hour” against capitalism’s separation of reproduction and production and the repercussions this has for women who are predominantly associated with reproduction and estranged from production. This separation of reproduction from the productive sphere corresponds to binary distinctions between home and work, the private and the public respectively. The essay demonstrates how this apparent separation, though visible to the story’s narrator, often evades complex interconnections lying beneath. Recognising how women’s reproduction builds social infrastructure, embodies charge and agency, and fosters production complicates this formulation of reproduction as distinct from the productive sphere and weakens its significance in marginalising reproductive labour.

In Section 2, this essay engages explicitly with the argument of commodifying care work, represented

by the domestic staff referred to as the “maid” in “Happy Hour”. This section analyses how structures that underpin the sexual division of domestic labour are not challenged by externalising care work to underpaid domestic staff. Instead, relational work continues to be deprioritised and undervalued by individualising and commodifying care responsibilities. In its last section, the essay zooms into the context of “Happy Hour”. I pay attention to the specific kinship structure that is the site of unequal domestic labour duties in “Happy Hour”—the joint family system. Because of the structural design of the joint family, the social prestige it enjoys, and the legal sanction it receives, the home is a site of unequal power relations pitted against the married woman. Compounding the effect of capitalism’s separation of reproduction and production and the weakness of financial solutions, the enduring silence of the women in “Happy Hour” is maintained by the overarching extended family unit, which places them at the periphery. While “Happy Hour” brings to bear this peripheralisation of the mothers,

Sections 2 and 3 of the essay throw into relief how the former misses the theoretical and structural implications of outsourcing care work, underestimating the ‘productive’ role of mothers performing domestic labour.

### **Capitalist Hierarchies and the Reproduction-Production Binary**

The capitalist system of production that predominates our lives draws a neat line between reproduction and production. While the sphere of reproduction includes actions of care, affection, and nurture, which effectively reproduce labour capacity, production refers more crudely to the production of goods and services in industries and factories that have tangible exchange value for consumption and investment. This bounded understanding of reproduction and production as separate spheres underestimates how the spheres feed into each other, especially when this binary is mapped onto the sex binary such that we have world views based on reproduction by women and production by men. Relegating all the things women do

to reproduction underestimates the complex interconnections between production as wage labour and the social systems of kinship that women traditionally maintain. What constitutes capitalist systems are not only the faceless interactions between suppliers and consumers based on purchasing power and skill but real, personal, and intimate relations that are developed as individuals’ actions become families and kinships. Reproductive labour directly underpins productive labour. However, there is an asymmetry in the rewards and recognition given to each. Affective labour is unpaid and lacks specific working hours, and its complexity is trivialised by positioning it as women’s biological expression and duty.

The household in “Happy Hour” operates on a neat distinction between the instrumental work performed by men, the benefits it accrues, and the affective labour performed by women. There is a normative hierarchisation of production over reproduction. Production is considered more demanding and valuable, and its doers

are entitled to family merriment, leisure, and a position of authority in the household. Cooking within the home, ordinarily considered reproductive labour and a part of women’s domain, is not perceived as work but as duty and organic care, which underestimates its drudgery. The thought that leisure is for women is not considered by any family member except the author/narrator. While the men in “Happy Hour” come home from work, women have always been at work at home. The refrain running throughout the essay—“after all, they just came home from work”—reflects the foundational reason behind the household’s personal (and political) choices of spatiality, time use, conversations, and consumption during Happy Hour. The “hard-working”, that is, earning (male) members need a drink, children’s company, visual entertainment, and warm snacks to unwind after their difficult day in capitalist chambers.

The earnings of these hard-working members are essential for maintaining the family’s middle-class status. They enable members to



enjoy an array of food and beverages, comforting furniture, sources of entertainment, and the luxury (or necessity) of hiring domestic staff. Because men perform this instrumental role of providing for the family, they must be rewarded at home. Women, therefore, perform the expressive role in hot kitchens and help reduce men's burden by providing them with food, love, and understanding—at hours and in forms that suit the men's fancies and convenience. The narrator, however, recognises the anomaly in an ordinary family evening. She notices that the mothers are visibly tired and overworked as they perform the last leg of their day's duties—cooking snacks followed by dinner, serving meals, creating a conducive leisurely environment for their husbands and children, and cleaning up after their leisure is successful. She observes the drudgery of the women's work in the quotidian silences and speeches, the devaluation of their efforts by 'loving family members', and the inaccessibility of leisure to them, prompting her to wonder what gets recognised as work and for whom is

the home a place of rest. Furthermore, whether the mothers in "Happy Hour" undertake paid labour during the day followed by the second shift of domestic work in the evenings or are homemakers throughout the day, their working hours are invariably longer than the men's. There are visible reactions to this in the tiredness that the mothers demonstrate, as well as the medical repercussions visible as migraines, swollen ankles, and burn marks from the kitchen.

The anthropology of gender and kinship specifically challenges the notion that capitalism is a structurally "coherent", "a priori" economic system that determines reality by showing the active contribution of women in reproduction and production (Bear et al, "Gens"). Capitalism is produced relationally by women and men, by their motivations, emotions, and actions, which are more complex and less consistent than theoretical models of instrumental rationality make them seem. This relational work, performed predominantly by women, produces forms of "social infrastructure"—connections

of intimacies within and beyond households along which market and other forms of exchange are communicated and sustained (Elyachar, "Next Practices" 120). Anthropologists have noted that this social infrastructure is not built unconsciously and overnight. Women across contexts demonstrate directed efforts in relational labour, referred to as "phatic labour", to build dynamic and well-knit communicative channels that form the bedrock of capitalist enterprise (Elyachar, "Phatic Labour").

Analogously, the women in "Happy Hour", through their relational work, help build and sustain the social infrastructure of the joint family system, such as the relations their children share with their uncles, by bearing the effort of organising any social event. They also direct their labour towards ends that the narrator may not perceive yet, including possibly ensuring that their daughters (the narrator) eat as well as their sons. However, hidden under the "teleology of the invisible hand", which relegates reproduction under production, is unrecognised labour and the

marginalisation of those who perform it (Bear et al, "Gens").

### **Debatable/Possible Causes and Solutions**

There is considerable disagreement among scholars on precisely when and why domestic labour came to be associated with women. Uma Chakravarti, in "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India", traces women's association with the domestic space at the intersection of expanding agriculture—wherein people started producing beyond their sustenance needs—with caste affinities and notions of purity in kinship relations. She argues that with the expansion of the agricultural economy, different castes collaborated in economic production, which enhanced the threat of caste intermingling and generated the impetus to safeguard generational wealth and caste purity. The mechanism to ensure minimal inter-caste fraternity was the confinement of women to the regulated personal sphere, where their socialisation, marriage, and kinship ties could be overseen and mediated by kins in

authority. The segregation of personal and professional spaces to exercise control over women's bodies and women's subsequent association with work in the personal sphere, that is, domestic labour, was conceived at this historic juncture.

An alternate perspective from anthropological literature is that even pre-capitalist locales not characterised by wage labour were characterised by the sexual division of domestic labour. For instance, Monica Hunter Wilson's work in the 1930s shows how gendered production—men working in mines and women managing rural homes in African societies—and its incumbent class distinctions between men and women are rooted in gendered social reproduction that preceded wage employment in specific locales (Wilson, *Reaction to Conquest*). While women's daily hours were heavily occupied with social reproductive roles before capitalism, men were relatively richer with available time, being free of reproductive responsibilities. This *availability* of men translated into their migration and employment in

wage labour, making them spatially independent and economically well-off relative to women. Hunter's argument reveals that domestic labour divisions are embedded in something other than the economic logic of segregated spheres.

Where Hunter and Chakravarti concur is that they identify non-economic forces such as caste and gender as the constructs that underpin the sexual division of labour. On the contrary, capitalist-centric approaches locate gendered inequalities and their solutions in individual enterprise and effort, not in structural dynamics of race, gender, and global politics. The scope for emancipating women's position for scholars falling in the rational-choice tradition lies in women's inclusion in capitalism's productive enterprise. Women can use their earnings to individually challenge the contours of their marginalisation—including domestic labour burdens. However, what this rational-choice model overlooks are the deep embeddedness of gender roles, as well as the devalorisation of specific

skills, jobs, and pay in capitalism. Hunter and Chakravarti's reasoning weakens the capitalist master narrative around "working women" and dual-earner households as the ideals for women's emancipation. They help us understand why emancipation through wage work has not had straightforward results for earning women.

We find an instance of wage employment mentioned in "Happy Hour" when the family refers to the domestic staff helping the women in the kitchen as a "maid". The silences in "Happy Hour"—the staff as well as the narrator's silence regarding the former's experience—reveal the peripheral, "in the shadows" position of the "maid". In the context of the discussion above, it is at the intersection of neoliberalism's "reign of flexibility" (Bourdieu, "The Essence of Neoliberalism") and the gender-based devaluation of care-based work that domestic workers find themselves being exploited. The development trajectory of most economies emphasised the need for formalised jobs during the 1950s. However, in

the post-1970s years, the proliferation of a large number of informal jobs in manual labour, gig work, micro-entrepreneurship, domestic services, and care chains challenged the discourse around mere employment as liberating (Meagher, Laura, and Bolt, "Introduction: Global Economic Inclusion and African Workers"). It has been emphasised, especially in the context of the informal economy, the importance of examining the quality of jobs, not just their quantity (Castell and Portes, *The Informal Economy*). Financial deregulation and the mobility of capital intensified the competition firms faced in attracting capital (Bourdieu, "The Essence of Neoliberalism"). Firms responded by offloading the risk onto workers by offering precarious terms of employment, including informal contracts, reduced employer responsibility over working conditions and security, and highly individualised wage relations, making workers responsible for their dynamic earnings through performance-evaluation-based pay systems (Bourdieu, "The Essence of Neoliberalism"). This precarious employment design was

particularly notorious, specifically in the context of domestic work, because domestic work had already been essentialised as a low-effort organic duty. Domestic work in India continues to be classified as informal work and has been performed predominantly by women from lower castes and classes (Chigateri and Kundu, “Reversing Domestic Workers’ Rights”). While the commodification of care in paid domestic roles does, to some degree, compensate workers and alleviate their economic hardships, the terms of employment and the circumstances of compensation remain highly exploitative and detrimental to the goal of emancipating women working these jobs.

The “maid” in “Happy Hour” does not offer a solution to the burden of domestic work that the narrator finds her mother and aunts suffering from. While she does pick up some of the work that the narrator’s kin would have had to do, it is at poor pay, with a lack of recognition as a formalised worker or staff member, and it is at the cost of the relational work that the “maid’s” family needs. One extreme

example of the relational care gap that commodified care work generates as an offloading mechanism is the case of transnational motherhood. Richer countries in the Global North employ poorer women from Global South countries to serve as nannies. For instance, the case of Latina women emigrating to California reveals that nannies have undefined working hours, earn barely the minimum wage, and their emigration creates a tangibly impactful care deficit in their families. They emigrate without their children and kin and find themselves performing traditionally gendered jobs in domestic labour where they experience the compounded alienation of longer working hours, “transnational motherhood”, and poor wages while also being forced to reimagine motherhood to encompass both their financial involvement and physical distance from their children (Avila and Hondagneu-Sotelo). Domestic work in this form continues to enable capitalism to parasitically use its workers as cheap labour. Capitalist working arrangements do not nurture the worker or their families; instead, by

distancing the primary caregiver from their homes, they create tensions in the psyche of the worker (emigrating mother) as well as in her family dynamics. The “feminist aura” illuminating the women-earning-wages visual insidiously hides the fact that social reproduction is displaced or outsourced by richer women to ethnically and economically subordinated women, producing a network of underpaid and overworked care chains. The poorest women from the Global South or lower classes and castes lie at the bottom, perform care work for commodified and private purposes, and are alienated from their families and themselves (Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”). Overall, relational work is unfairly offloaded on workers who are poorly compensated and whose conditions remain vulnerable despite meagre economic amelioration. In the case of “Happy Hour”, reducing the women’s housework burden by hiring more underpaid domestic staff is not addressing the deeper structural problem, which is the politics of relational work. Such work continues to be under-recognised and

undervalued in capitalist-centric social functioning.

### **The Overarching Structure: The Joint Family System**

“Happy Hour” initiates an inquiry into the specific kinship system of a joint family and the labour divisions within it. The story is set in a joint family system, where married couples cohabit with the husband’s family, including his parents and the respective families of his brothers. Joint families in India have faced severe pressures, leading to their breakdown into nuclear set-ups with the advent of a liberalised Indian economy, as sons, and subsequently daughters-in-law, relocated for work (Gould, “Is the Modernity-Tradition Model All Bad?”). However, the rarity of this set-up in contemporary India gives it a nostalgic appeal, and both social and political institutions hark back to the glories of the past, extolling its virtues while attempting to sustain this institution. Not only does Bollywood cinema through films such as *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999) [We Are Together] and, more recently, *Tu Jhooti Main Makkar* (2023) [You’re



a Liar, I'm Cunning], present the extended family set-up as the morally right and even happier way to live, legal institutions such as the Indian judiciary also uphold the value of a joint family vis-à-vis nuclear families.

In the discourse around the challenges this institution faces from economic changes and sociocultural developments, gender and the role of married women are often placed at the forefront. The usual projected challenge to a joint family, for instance, in *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, is the woman who tries to make her husband leave the family owing to her individualist aspirations—that invariably casts her as strong-headed, evil, and selfish. This woman finds her way back to social-, familial-, and self-acceptance by the film's climax when she is reformed enough to understand that family values and love reside in harmoniously living together with her husband's extended family. Unfortunately, this overarching narrative regarding women's aspirations and needs at loggerheads with the joint family set-up enjoys legal sanction. For instance, the

Supreme Court of India recently noted that a woman preventing a man from his “pious obligation” of cohabiting with his parents is committing “cruelty”, given that she is meant to reside with “his” family upon marriage (Supreme Court of India). Another judgement by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2023 upheld a husband's charge that his wife is a “proud, arrogant, stubborn, short-tempered and pretentious lady” who disobeys her in-laws and is too progressive for having refused the custom of *Muh Dikhai*.

Under these legally upheld social conditions, not only is a married Hindu woman supposed to live in a joint family, but she is also expected to enjoy and sustain it as her moral duty. The idea propagated under this scheme is that any disjuncture between her and the family stems from and can be resolved through working on her character alone; the institutional contours and how they might sideline an individual woman's fulfilment are not considered. Such a discourse makes it seem almost natural for a right-minded woman

to live peacefully in her husband's extended family. It underestimates women's hard work and attempts to coexist with newer family members, and also, at times, bolsters hierarchies within the joint family set-up, relegating the threat-posing women to the bottom.

Three units interact during “Happy Hour”—children (disaggregated by gender), the monolith of men on cushioned chairs, and married women in the hot kitchen. Family time during “Happy Hour” is defined by and in the interests of men—the women serve their quotidian needs of alcohol and food, brothers exchange jokes and strengthen their bonds, younger boys (like the narrator's brother) are being initiated into the circle of masculine jokes and lessons with alcohol, and economic resources have facilitated the spatial comfort of cushioned chairs, dining tables, and television screens. The men communicate with the women as a unit of brothers tied together, with visible silence between spouses. Their brotherly bond is at the core of the family; everyone else's actions and words are directed

towards them, and women are mere facilitators of this core—“perpetuating the present” with housework and raising the next generation to ensure a smooth patrilineal succession (Beauvoir 487). The spatiality of the dining table visibilises which “members” matter, or rather, who the family “members” really are. The men and children are seated at the dining table; when they are done eating, the women serve themselves while standing and then sit on the periphery of the dining room as peripheral participants of the conversations at the table. Their labour in the kitchen distances them from family leisure, as does their peripheral seating when they do step out. In the family triangle, they remain outsiders, watching their children and husbands interact and reap the former's affection. They are spoken about and not spoken to.

# Works Cited

## Primary Text:

Grover, Sonakshi. "Happy Hour". 2023.

## Secondary Texts:

Avila, Ernestine, and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. "'I'm Here, but I'm There': The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood." *Gender and Society*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1997, pp. 548–571.

Bear, Laura, et al. "Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism." *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 30 March 2015. <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>. Accessed 9 May 2022.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2011.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Essence of Neoliberalism." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1998, <https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

Castells, A., and A. Portes. *The Informal Economy*. John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, 1993, pp. 579–85.

Chigateri, Kundu. "Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights: Stories of Backlash and Resilience in Delhi." *Institute of Development Studies*, 16 Aug 2023, <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/reversing-domestic-workers-rights-stories-of-backlash-and-resilience-in-delhi/>. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

DeGraff, Deborah S., and Rebecca M. Centanni. "Double Shift, Double Balance:

Housework in the Presence of Children in the United States." *Gender and Time Use in a Global Context*, edited by R. Connelly and E. Kongar, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 305–331. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56837-3\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56837-3_13).

Elyachar, Julia. "Phatic Labour, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2010, pp. 452–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01265.x>

———. "Next Practices: Knowledge, Infrastructure, and Public Goods at the Bottom of the Pyramid." *Public Culture*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 106–129.

Fraser, Nancy. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review*, vol. 100, 2016, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>. Accessed 15 Mar 2023.

Gould, Harold A. "Is the Modernity-Tradition Model All Bad?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 5, no. 29/31, 1970, pp. 1171–76.

Meagher, K., M. Laura, and M. Bolt. "Introduction: Global Economic Inclusion and African Workers." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 52 no. 4, 2016, pp. 471–82.

Supreme Court of India. *Narendra vs K.Meena*. *Indian Kanoon*, 6 Oct. 2016. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/130314186/>. Accessed 9 May 2022.

Wilson, Monica Hunter. *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*. Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1961.

# Integrally A-Part: Labour that Sustains a Premises

Raunaq Saraswat

Raunaq works as a Learning Designer at an early childhood education NGO. He was previously a Correspondent with The Indian Express, and a freelance culture writer and journalist. His work has appeared in The Quint, Mint Lounge, The Wire Science, The Hindu Sunday Magazine, amongst others. He wishes to work at the confluence of Ethnography, Personal Essay, and Fiction someday.

## Prologue

Nobody I walk up to has the luxury of time. Not Narendra. Not Arjun. Not Ammu. Not Samita\*. They are all almost always preoccupied; their work ceaseless, binding. A conversation with them is partly a matter of luck and partly a matter of persistence. In one instance, I have to hint at my arrival, roam with a diary and a pen in hand in the vicinity, and wait for Arjun to return my querying gaze—Arjun is able to do so only after a while. In another instance, I must pause the recorder every five minutes on account of Narendra's preordained tasks—he keeps leaving and returning, getting up and sitting down. Such a wait and punctuation(s) dot all my conversations, wherein a worker always seems to be straddling the unexpected (the conversation) with the more unavoidable (the work). The former, though, very steadily reveals a make-up of the latter, of the lives of workers who usher a university premise into motion every day along with its students and teachers, and keep it running until long after the teaching and learning end for the day.

\* Names changed

Raunaq  
Saraswat

This is a story about the machinations of their work. Its reasons and results. It is equally a story about their locus in a university, that they continue to be the inevitable fulcrum of.

Partly due to my preoccupations with finding lyricism in the lives of the workers I met, and partly because of the qualities lyrical prose affords—of delicacy and tenderness—that I have also tried to cultivate in my gaze towards the workers, the essay is tuned to distinct phrasing at points. The liberties it takes in transcribing expression do not undercut the worker's narration of their own stories in that they are reproduced with as much faith as they were obtained. The style, voice, or phrasing in this account of their narratives, depending on the vantage one chooses to see it from, borrows from many forms: ethnographic writing, long-form narrative reportage, journalistic articulations, and creative non-fiction. It is, in places, taut but also wavy; reflexive but also plainly descriptive; academic but also colloquial. I do not know how to exactly label it myself.



## A Worker Descends: Narendra's Livelihood and Life at Ashoka University

In an alternate destiny, Narendra would have been a student. Take away his red t-shirt and cap—imprinted as they are with the name of the shop he is employed at—and he may as well meld with the scores of students on campus. The resemblance is not all too uncanny, though.

Narendra is 20, about the age of many students at Ashoka University. A straight smile outlines his wiry frame when I greet him at first. He instantly agrees to a conversation. Nine o'clock, the next day, he tells me when I ask for a time. He has little anyway, but Narendra is generous, as I also come to learn in the course of the next few days.

Raised in the Bharatpura Patpara hamlet in the Samastipur region of Bihar, Narendra is the third youngest of five siblings. He does not speak much of his two elder brothers save for recalling them as being disinterested in lending a hand at his father's cycle shop in the village. From

here on, his narration starts to reveal his self-determination.

Narendra began working at his father's cycle shop in his adolescence—partly to quench the ubiquitous curiosity of teens, and partly on account of his filial compulsions to help, more so when none was available. Once this work was underway, a day at school was to be followed by an evening at the shop. Homework was accompanied by the gruntwork a cycle shop required. "*Business karna hobby ban gaya tha* [Running the shop had become a hobby]," he tells me from the corner adjacent to the counter he mans daily.

The conversation is interrupted by a student who walks to the counter at the library cafe. She needs an iced tea and Narendra, resultantly, his work break. I scribble some remarks of his in my notebook as he leaves. He is back before I can place a period. The job is a matter of seconds. A second nature of sorts, almost.

Now visible in his adherence to the tasks at the cafe, Narendra's

committal disposition first sprung up when he and his father decided to open a rag shop adjacent to their cycle store. "*Excited tha* [I was excited]," he says, recounting his jubilation at the growth of the business. The rationale was to collect all the waste and the litter from their area, for why else should someone else be doing this work? "*Hamare ilake se koi aur kyun le jaayega, hum kyun nahi le jayenge?* [Why will someone else pick up from our area, why won't we pick up?]," he explains, asserting both right and righteousness.

Not much has changed in the years between Narendra's time at the two shops in Bihar and the cafe at Ashoka *vis-à-vis* this spirit and the appended workaholism. His work and education engulfed him throughout the day earlier. His job engulfs him for 12 hours daily now too. He does not complain. He never has. The work though has assumed greater significance now: he is no longer just charged with the upkeep of a shop, but himself and his family too. There is much more at stake now than it was when he worked at his father's shop

back home.

A financial crumbling at home, exacerbated by the pandemic, is to be blamed. The jolt first pushed him out of college in 2019, forcing him to migrate to Sonipat for work. His employment at Ashoka is an ongoing partial cure to the acutely chronic financial illness, a remittal nursing that must not stop.

The train journey to Delhi was a taxing transit, he recalls. "1200 kilometres, two days, *general bogey mein bahut struggle karke aaya tha* [I came in the general compartment with a lot of struggle]," Narendra says before turning a leaf in our conversation—from Bihar to Sonipat. He set foot in Ashoka University on 15 February, 2022 after spending two weeks in quarantine at his brother's house in Asawarapur, a village adjoining Ashoka. Thus began his tryst with a business at campus, and the campus business as a whole.

Narendra knows when the footfall at the cafe, situated on the ground floor of the Library Building, is higher than usual. "Monday, Tuesday,

Wednesday,” he tells me. I learned from his explanation that the high footfall pertains to the classes on the ground floor. He seemed to possess an astute knowledge of the workspace too, akin to his proficiency at the work it expects of him. It was not always like this, though.

Narendra was nearly dumbfounded at the start of his stint at Ashoka. The vastness of the premises daunted him, the extensive security unnerving him. “*Itni badi building hai, kaise log chadhte honge* [This is such a tall building, how must people climb it],” he quips, amused at his own bewilderment from those days. There was another problem, both equally slight and staunch as the small black coffee he would sell at the shop. Sandip, the person to whom Narendra was to report, spoke in a dialect he could not readily comprehend. “*Vo order kuch aur dete the, hum bana dete kuch aur the* [I would prepare something different from what he would order].” So much so that Sandip ji, as Narendra refers to him, stopped rectifying after a few attempts went in vain. Narendra

picked up the dialect in due time, while also finding his footing in the labyrinth that was Ashoka to him. He has been reprimanded for a few slip ups that recur here and there now as well, but, as Narendra says, “*thoda bahut daantna zaroori bhi hai* [some reprimand is necessary too].” In any case, he is a deft worker par excellence on most counts.

Narendra’s workday begins with him readying the cafe before it is thrown open to the students and other members of the Ashoka community. The first step is to populate the cafe shelf-on-display with snacks, all of them baked and wrapped in Sandip ji’s kitchen. Devoured faster than they are decked, the pizzas, rolls, and garlic bread on offer serve as an alternative or an appendix to a meal or two, or much more even, as the desire deems (un) fit. Most of Narendra’s remaining day then is spent in dishing these, along with the beverages poured by the now-characteristic Nescafe nozzle. Smaller serving for Rs 25, larger for Rs 30. Hour to hour, cup to cup, plate to plate, the shelf empties, Narendra’s

workday rolling out but also rolling up. He departs at around 10 or 11 every night before returning at 10 o’clock sharp the next morning. The inevitable shifts and swings between a dawn and another notwithstanding, this routine remains, repetitive in its sameness.

I asked Narendra about his motivations for work, and about what keeps him going and coming back. “*Apna business karna hai* [I want to pursue a business of my own],” he says. “*Ghar ka financial help bhi karna hai* [I want to financially help my household too],” he follows up. These drivers stem from a compulsion to turn the wheels of life on a different track that is not merely fated but chosen. The businesses in question are the two shops Narendra left behind in Bihar *en route* to Ashoka. The prospect of returning to the rag shop and the repair shop and expanding them excites him still, much like it did when he first opened the rag shop with the hope of making it the whole and sole of the area. By 2024, he wants to return to Bihar, both due to his desires and his home soil.

The last piece of information

perhaps makes him more of a student. He does not just look like one but works like one, too; a necessity propels him every day; an end date becomes both a deadline and a destination to vie for. His slog, albeit unnoticed, is a prime example of persistence. Not just to make do but to make possible what he wishes. Narendra works for the materialisation of his dream—his every day underpinned by the zeal to not just overcome hardship but realise a desire, too.

Ashoka, for Narendra then, is a concerted attempt at a financial recovery, at a reconciliation with his roots—quite literally, too, as he harbours a desire to return to Bihar. He expresses his wish to go back after having accumulated enough to pull his family out of the bleak shadows of the pandemic. His ‘commitment’ to work—in the watchfulness he displays at the cafe, the motivation he turns up with, and the learning spirit he has come to possess—is a product of this need turned to want, of economic and spatial mobility. This commitment to work also makes Narendra one among the many who move out of their

villages to urban centres, grappling with the unknowns of a metropolis, all while trying to make ends meet for themselves and their families. In this relational state between a worker and their work, a sincere work ethic shrouds the workers' anxiety to reap the rewards due for migrating, with their dedication to work stemming as much from what it offers as from what they stand to lose in its absence. Geert De Neeve calls this commitment of the migrant worker to an employer or urban industry "a manifestation of the tension between hopes and realities, between dreams fulfilled and dreams foregone" (254). In Narendra's case, too, his commitment carries a hope to remake his reality for the better as he holds on to the dream of expanding the rag shop back at home.

De Neeve also situates this commitment of migrant workers to work in "the scope of mobility they see for themselves, the organisation of the specific urban industry, and the network and patronage they come to form and use in a city" (253). The worker toils under such a premise, or a promise, until it falls apart. The

commitment, then, does not always materialise into an imagined future that is better than the present. De Neeve demonstrates this using the example of workers who failed to fulfil their ambitions in an urban centre, whilst refusing also to return to where they came from, in the fear of shame and denigration. Even as the script of Narendra's success (or lack thereof) continues to write itself, the very fear of it falling apart looms unsaid in the background. As De Neeve underscores, migration brings "opportunities but simultaneously entrenches a lack of success with an intensified sense of shame and failure" (275). Whether the opportunity Narendra has found or the commitment he works with in the hope of making it count renders him successful remains to be seen. It will depend as much on his work as his work environment, that is, Ashoka University.

### **University of Labour**

Narendra's narrative is hardly one of a kind at Ashoka, or any other university, for that matter. The dearth of such portraits, then, is largely

due to an imaginative negligence of the Narendras in the premises—educational or otherwise. Their labour may be acknowledged, duly rewarded even, but it rarely finds a fuller, more attentive and detailed description of its contents.

A university space comprises many kinds of subjects: who teach, learn, administer, keep accounts, clean the corridors, guard the gates, make coffee, resolve mechanical and technical problems—and others whose designations and work profiles fall outside or in between these, but remain necessary for the ambit of the university. The service workers or the labouring staff of a university come to operate within this mix, providing the services essential to others, ensuring that the necessary or auxiliary pre-conditions for knowledge production and dissemination are met. They do so in numerous ways: in how the photocopies and printouts are secured from the one-stop-shop, how the students gather and chatter around a food joint, how the mess is neat and tidy on all counts, how the premises are secured, how the food is prepared,

the classes cleaned, the lawns maintained, and so on.

While being known and considered as an academic site, the university also doubles up as a professional workspace for its service workers. Ashoka University is peculiar in that regard, given its private, elite status, as well as a deep impetus given to ensuring the efficiency of the services it seeks to provide. The workers are key to this project and are expected to adhere to the professional codes the university makes for them.

In his ethnographic study, Aditya Ray defines "professionalisation" as adopting a favourable "corporeal and cognitive" disposition specific to the job and the role (4). This disposition, however, is not received "passively" by the workers. For even as the formation of the worker identity happens as a result of the demands placed on them by this professional code, the code itself goes through a crucial phase of "re-interpretation, re-configuration, and coping," impacting worker's "overall work lives and their sense of self" (4). This makes it necessary, then, to understand a worker's individual,



salient context as opposed to readily placing them within the work profile a workspace generates for them. In Ashoka too, likewise, each worker's life is changed singularly, depending on the roles they play, the places they hail from, and the aspirations they hold—either of them undergoing a process of social and emotional translation that occurs in the course of working at Ashoka, akin to the “re-interpretation, re-configuration, and coping” Ray highlights. It becomes, therefore, imperative to see how the worker sees the university.

In that regard, the labour of Arjun and Manoj is telling of the weight workers shoulder in the running of the university. Thirty-three years old, Arjun has been at Ashoka for about six months now. Manoj is 25 years old and had joined around the same time as Arjun. “We’re friends,” Arjun tells me one night, having carved out a slice of time from his rather swamped work life. Their job entails rinsing the used utensils at the mess at Ashoka, cleaning up the sitting area afterwards, and arranging the chairs and tables in the preordained fashion.

Between the first and last task, eight hours pass. “Seven p.m. to five a.m.,” Arjun apprises me of the timeline. They work night shifts.

Arjun and Manoj begin working just before dinner begins when sparkling steel plates await contact with the buffet and dish-washing in the sink afterwards—leftovers consisting of the remnants of an unsavoury dal or a portion of curry that overshot the appetite. The plates are arranged in one neat grey stack at the outset before they begin to deplete speedily. Each residue-lined plate makes its way to where Arjun, Manoj, and their peers work, who then wash them with soap and water till the plates become almost new. Ready to be sent back in the stack in time for breakfast in the morning. Their shift ends before breakfast, though, before its dual outcomes dawn: a stack of sparkling steel plates, awaiting contact with the buffet via yet another stream of students; Arjun and Manoj deep in slumber, having laboured throughout the wee hours. The beginning of the day for the former juxtaposes against the end of the latter.

Regarding the visibility of services facilitated by the workers at Ashoka, Arjun and Manoj's work is almost a hidden secret, done an hour before the daytime routine has been laid to rest, at a time when the premises of the university are only thinly populated. I meet Arjun and Manoj in the minutes intervening their working hours at night. The mess, where they rinse and wash the plates until the wee hours, wears a sparse look, with a few students walking in and out to collect an order from another eatery. Arjun and Manoj sit rather tentatively, checking for the presence of their supervisor as they speak. They do not want to catch his ire, they suggest.

If Arjun and Manoj—along with many other hands—maintain the mess service that promises to keep the members of the university hale and hearty, Samita and a slew of other security guards enable an ease available to its members. Imbuing the four walls of the campus with a semblance of security, externally, if not internally. Samita's work at the gate centres around identity

verification—of those who enter and exit the premises. She does so for the students and the visitors primarily, all of whom have to either scan their identity cards or put their names on a register. She does not get to permit anyone of her own accord, for those rules are laid out by the university administration. She ensures that only those permitted on the premises by the university enter after following the due process to do so—holding the barriers to the land inside the gates.

Samita has been guarding for about a year and a half now. She is stationed at Gate Number 1 on most days, where she authenticates the students as they enter and exit. Her work, like Arjun's and Manoj's, is key to a smooth and, more specifically, safe being of the university, paving a sense of safety so embedded in the air of the campus that it absorbs some fears and unleashes many freedoms.

As much as they are pivotal to the university, Samita, Arjun, and Manoj are also dependent on it for their own sustenance. Consequently, in the balance between a benefactor and the benefitting, Ashoka weighs on

the former scale much more heavily. In the case of Arjun, his filial duties determine the timings of his work as well. “*Bachchon ke school ki vajah se raat main kaam karte hain* [We work at night owing to our children’s school timings],” he says, underscoring the interdependence between the livelihood and life outside of it.

“*Majboori kaam karati hai* [Compulsion makes me work],” Samita tells me from under the shade adjoining the gate one afternoon. She is not really allowed to talk about her work with people, as far as the rules of the university go. Her hesitance is apparent in our conversation, too, punctuated as it is with long pauses. Between two such pauses, she speaks of her two children and how she is the lone breadwinner in the family who must continue to work for them to continue studying. She reveals her ambition in another conversation: to open a beauty parlour that will allow her to both work and carry out her maternal duties easily. Like Narendra, Samita too harbours a dream. She does not have a graduation year in mind as of yet though. Or she chooses

not to disclose it.

Curiously, however, Samita dubs Ashoka a “family” in response to my question about what she thinks of the place now. She breaks into a chuckle immediately after, withdrawing for a few seconds in contemplation of only she-knows-what.

### Constitution of the “Family”

Samita’s characterisation of Ashoka as a family is fraught with a fallacy. The utterly transactional and transient nature of the workers’ relationships with the university that employs them stands in contrast to the filial attitudes of “permanence” and “selflessness” found in the middle classes in India (Haynes 149). Her referral to the term then hinges on the students she interacts with and brushes past intermittently during her work, who speak to her time and again without any objective per se. These students check in on her, asking questions about her well-being and also answering any queries she may have for them without necessarily wanting or requiring anything in return—giving a semblance of permanence and

selflessness to their equation, qualities that compel her to term Ashoka ‘a family’.

Students both graze and grace a worker’s life, lending examples to Samita’s claim of the familial at Ashoka. If the former happens via random, sporadic encounters, chit-chats, and conversations, the latter is carried out more dedicatedly in the form of student activism for workers’ rights, even if only by a subset of the student body. The [articles](#) published under the aegis of “The Edict”—the student newspaper of Ashoka—that document the rallying of students in favour of the workers at Ashoka and against the university administration are a case in point where students help workers out in times of need, kin-like.

Samita’s notion of Ashoka as a family hinges on this goodwill *vis-à-vis* the students but knowingly or unknowingly presupposes the coldness of the university at large. A student’s empathy, and the lack thereof by the university, ensures a common goal in that light. A worker begins and remains foremost, a

worker, pegged by the indifference of the university, on the one hand, and the pity of students, on the other. While interested and often keen on helping a worker in need, the student’s relation with the worker is limited by and to their respective social positions, whereby a worker is always the one to be helped when in need, the student is always the one to help them when they want. This dynamic sustains an unspelt hierarchy between the two, with the students enjoying an upper hand, even if, as Samita finds, they become a family to these workers.

Ammu’s story is a product of the helper–helped dynamic. Her food stall, called Dosai was, in fact, built with the help of an alum of the institute after he had grown fond of the previous eatery Ammu and her husband had started, and unfortunately shut, in Delhi. She regularly interacts with students by way of taking their food orders or suggesting to them what to eat. Over time, students have also come to form an amicable relationship with Ammu.

She attests to the care and love she has come to receive from

the students at Ashoka at different junctures. “*Mera intention yahi hai ki students ko badhiya se badhiya khaana mile* [My intention is that students should have as good a meal as possible],” she tells me on the sultry night I finally get to meet her, after two failed attempts in the earlier two weeks. Her motivations arise from the compliments she receives from the students for the food they serve. “Some of them eat all three meals here,” Ammu excitedly adds. She came to Ashoka about six years ago, working in the infirmary before she set up Dosai.

The students’ behaviour and attitudes can enforce adaptations too, particularly if the worker(s) are at the front end of their worksite and interact with them on a routine basis. Narendra, for example, shares the challenges he faced in understanding English in the first few days after being employed at the shop. “*Kuch samajh nahi aata tha, foreign ke student kya bolte the* [I couldn’t make out what the foreign students said],” he sighs. He would go on to teach himself English from a YouTube channel in the course

of the next few months and build a grasp good enough to comprehend the utterances of the students who came to his shop. In our conversation too, Narendra peppers his speech with a word from the language from time to time. He seems to have learnt some English.

“Student *help karte hain* [Student help us],” Samita says, underscoring another facet of the rapport she and her co-workers share with the students at Ashoka. Besides the affability, students can also offer handy suggestions from their own basket of educational experiences and information here and there. In doing so, they wear the hat of a teacher for the workers, who are keen to know more and glean bits that are relevant to their predicament. This also follows and feeds into the hierarchical nature of their equation: the knowledge asymmetry conforming to the upper hand a student enjoys over the worker.

“*Apne baccho ke liye pooch sakte hain* [I can ask questions for my children],” Samita tells me as she elaborates on how the conversations

with students have hovered around possible options after secondary school. She is much less reticent in this part and more confident. It is presumably the students’ doing.

The possibility of the influence of students’ behaviour on the workers is made clear by Narendra’s narration of the sweeping change in his ways of speaking. He contrasts the dialect in his village with the dialect he has come to pick up by observing and interacting with students at Ashoka—the former is rugged, the latter soft. Narendra says he is afraid he will have to let go of this virtuous trait once he moves back. “*Vahan toh vahan ke jaisa bolna padega na* [I’ll have to speak how people speak there],” he avers.

The shift in Ammu’s case is less transient, mostly because her position at Ashoka is permanent. “*Main kitna aaram se baat karti hu students se* [I speak so slowly to students],” she tells me, suggesting that the ever-pleasant interactions with students have moderated her temperament too. She does not get annoyed as easily now, owing to the patience Dosai has granted her. Her husband made the

same observation too, she says.

From one family to another, from Ashoka to home and back, life and livelihood complete a full circle for the likes of Ammu. First, she became at Ashoka what home made her out to be. Now, she becomes at home what Ashoka makes her.

What emerges at the end of my ethnographic encounter with each worker is their markedly distinguishable portrait: Narendra is a committed migrant, Arjun and Manoj work away from plain sight, and Samita and Ammu find themselves at the receiving end of students’ help. While the university appears to these workers and their lives and identities as a promise, it remains an unrealised one. While it gives them a sense of family, the sense remains predicated on a hierarchical undercurrent. There are cases also where the university chooses to keep their labour discreet, imagining itself to be free from its contingencies. In this process, what comes out is an ignorant tendency of the university system: to turn away from those who turn its wheels day after day with



their labour. A liberal arts university of the like of Ashoka, claiming to be centred on the ethos of humanity and social sciences education, creates a peculiar dissonance here, as it remains unbeknownst of the many social realities that birth knowledge from within its premises.

### **Epilogue: From the End to the Beginning**

Every published text mutates in the course of its journey from conception to fruition and undergoes changes that result from scratching its surface, sometimes peeling its layers, or even poking a hole into its seemingly sturdy frame. These steps reveal to the writer (and their undelighted editor) the composition of their text in its minutiae, the mish-mash of phrases and qualifiers and punctuations that are yet unable to support the frame it is stuffed in, and the cracks that remain in the frame as a result. This is akin to the last stages of carpentering, when after the logs of wood have been cut into pieces and glued and nailed together, the structure so ready needs to be varnished, refilled, and reglued before it can leave the hands

of the craftsperson and be released into the world. What remains the same, though, both in the process of a text's transformation and carpentering, is the basic form: an essay remains an essay; a story, a story; a report, a report; and a research paper, a research paper. A change of form, unless deliberate, is rare. This essay, while mutating like any other, may have undergone such a reformation—as it turned from being an assignment for a course to a selection for a publicly available journal.

I will begin from the beginning, from the time the assignment was given and the essay gestated. The first leg of our Critical Writing course was winding down, the deadline of our second assignment inching unnervingly close with each day of dilly-dallying. Sayan, our instructor, introduced the next term-wide assignment in the penultimate class just then, eliciting more concerned sighs than relief. An assignment was already due, and another was going to be due soon. The life cycle of a student assignment begins really not from the point a student

begins to produce them but when they are unveiled and assigned to them, marking the first formalised acknowledgement of a work that needs to be brought into existence. Likewise, then, the said assignment, which would result in the formation of this essay, became consciously available to a student's mind and memory from that very class. It is the first characteristic of the university assignment form, perhaps: it originates as it surfaces inside a classroom.

This assignment we were to carry out was still slightly different in that it was not going to be contained wholly within the classroom itself, as assignments often tend to be. We were to roam the university, mine it for stories that spoke to us, could be spoken of, and probe deeper through interviewing, surveying, and inter-textualising. It was an ethnographic endeavour, if not an ethnography per se, for the latter was difficult and improper to conduct with such little training and time at our disposal. I kept vacillating between ideas and spaces in the university that could

be delved into, even as the date to share our concept notes drew close. My options included the aesthetics of the Ashoka University library and the love of solitude I carried within—and an unknown third that I hoped would grip me more firmly than the first two whenever it occurred.

I have tried, within the limits and allowances of my identities, to grasp the unnoticed. In other words, I have looked to tell stories from a different, more necessary, standpoint or tell the story of a people whose tale has not been told yet. It is a fraught exercise, always riddled with the concerns of appropriation, projection, and falsification. It requires an impassioned impulse, too, to proceed with telling a story of the other while knowing the impossibility of returning it to them. When my third unknown idea struck me as a culmination of a similar instinct, I was both excited and tentative. I wanted to speak to and of the workers in the university, in what I saw could become an alternate imagination of the university space. I wanted it so because I had leaned towards knowing the workers around

me closely and found ethnography to be the most suitable medium to look at the university vis-à-vis the workers critically. All throughout drafting a concept note for this idea, however, I could not find a resolution to the tension that was going to underpin such a project, its ethicality notwithstanding: what justified an upper-caste male student 'researcher' peering into the lives of workers who belonged most likely to marginalised or underprivileged communities? Relenting, but also not, I surrendered to my cognition and impulse by the time I submitted the concept note, noting:

I must, however, admit that my keenness in exploring the lives of the workers follows from, at least in some proportion, the same thrilling but totally self-serving desire a Rintu Thomas or a Guneet Monga harbour, as they set out to unfurl the lives that are different, novel, and quite possibly more deprived than most. The desire of us storytellers then, is steeped

in a luxury of thinking and being, even as it attempts to provide for a greater visibility of those who are shorn of these luxuries and more.

It's all riddled with contradictions in the end.

Once handed out, assignments can become the focal point of students' outlook, the reason why they converge, and from which also emerges the pathways to learning, retention, and comprehension. The question of dates and processes dominated our classroom too, once the concept notes were submitted. Every class was not just a lesson on its own but a step closer to the final session, where the assignment had to be presented. Conversations both inside and outside the Critical Writing classroom would veer towards the subjects people had opted for, the steps they were at, and the processes they were going to follow. This was also the lone assignment for the term and carried a high price, to be either paid or made by the student, depending on what they chose to do. We were bound by a palpable if

latent anxiety: running around, pestering people, reviewing literature, rethinking ideas, designing questions, and doing whatever we could individually in a collective to bring our essays to life. This was the second feature of a university assignment at play: it is circulated in the university alone, more specifically and privately in the class that does it.

I tried to catch a glimpse of the workers' lives that I wanted to draw from as and when they let me in. Much like any work of reportage, this ethnographic essay too was borne by the generosity of the subjects whose stories it was trying to tell. I entered into the conversations with workers with the hope of knowing something about their lives at, before, and outside Ashoka, something that could allow me to make sense of what they did, why and how they did so, and the equations they had come to develop with the larger university ecosystem. I took notes, recorded wherever permissible, but more importantly, listened as much as possible. Underneath the power asymmetries that criss-cross a project of this sort, the tensions that remain, even if forgotten, lie perhaps in the prerogative

of every ethnographer, reporter, or storyteller—to genuinely, eagerly, and patiently listen. I listened as Narendra, Samita, Manoj, Arjun, and Ammu gave me a sneak peek into their stories, thinking as they spoke of what to say next, so as to get a chance to listen to them more and more.

I submitted the text I could muster by the deadline to ensure it was accounted for in the grading. The assignment wrapped itself up with the final presentations in the final class of the course, our work culminating with no external traces, save the ones it left on the students, their subjects, and the instructor. The final feature: a typical assignment is a means to an end, limited in time, space, and sometimes, quality too.

I posited the different (possible) characteristics of the assignment in the lead-up to an inquiry I want to leave unresolved: is the assignment a form or a frame of its own?

Insofar as differences can

highlight singularities, it is prudent to return here to the reformation of this essay from an assignment to one selected for a publicly available journal, the latter imposing the necessary mandates of its construct on the essay in both its logic and aesthetics. The latter also ascribes the essay a value of its own, different and disjunct from a grade the assignment came to be associated with. What is above is better but also different from what was in its contents, form, meaning, purpose, value, readership, and writing, too. The differentiation is not to undermine the concerns or processes an assignment carries or brings with itself but perhaps to see them in a shared context of the form the assignment itself is and works with—in this case, the ethnography.

## Works Cited

- De Neve, Geert. "Expectations and Rewards of Modernity: Commitment and Mobility among Rural Migrants in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 37, no.1-2, 2003, pp. 251-280.
- Haynes, Douglas E. "Just Like a Family? Recalling the Relations of Production in the Textile Industries of Surat and Bhiwandi, 1940-60." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.33, no. 1-2, 1999, pp. 141-169.
- Ray, Aditya. "Professionalism as a Soft Skill: The Social Construction of Worker Identity in India's New Services Economy." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2023, pp. 1-20.
- Pratap, Anushree, Bashir, Sana. "Ashoka's contractual partner violates workers' rights, VC says options limited." *The Edict*, <http://edictarchive.the-edict.in/index.php/2021/10/19/ashokas-contractual-partner-violates-workers-rights-vc-says-options-limited/>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2023.





**Illustration 2:** *Revelation*

Over time and engagement, the cracks in the structure are made visible as the creepers grow through the impenetrable walls that uphold power structures.



# Unravelling the Challenges of HIV-AIDS Awareness Campaigns in Nepal through a Language Lens

**Aayushma Adhikari**

Aayushma Adhikari is from Kathmandu, Nepal. After completing her undergraduate education in Economics, she joined Ashoka University as a Young India Fellow in the batch of 2023. She took her critical writing course titled 'Philosophy, History and Anthropology of Life Sciences' with Harshvardhan Siddharthan. She is currently pursuing Masters in Liberal Studies (MLS) at Ashoka University with a concentration in Sociology and Anthropology under the guidance of Prof. Kathryn Collins Hardy.

Her thesis is titled, 'Language ideologies as barriers to the sense of belonging in Nepal' where she draws upon semiotic processes for linguistic differentiation and analyses their implications for everyday interactions. She enjoys playing badminton, admires Nepali poetry from the 20th century, seldom says no to trekking up to the mountains in Nepal, and never says no to tea!

Scholars across disciplines have shown a keen interest in language and its influence on society. They have been particularly intrigued by the interplay of linguistic constructs with issues of politics, society, and health. Drawing on scholarly discourse and personal encounters, this paper discusses the consequences of the intersection of language and cultural taboos and their influence on the effectiveness of HIV-AIDS awareness campaigns in Nepal.

An influential paper on the study of linguistic anthropology in Nepal by Stacy Leigh Pigg, titled "Languages of Sex and AIDS in Nepal: Notes on the Social Production of Commensurability", explores the role of language in the effectiveness of communication related to HIV-AIDS. The discourse on HIV-AIDS has never been popular in Nepal because such conversations generally induce discomfort. I would argue that though there is general awareness, the understanding of the severity of the disease is poor. Pigg refers to a quip among young middle-class

women in Kathmandu: "Nowadays when your marriage is being arranged, your family should demand an HIV test along with the horoscope" (492). These comments reflect the level of misunderstanding regarding the disease as people associate it with the "character" of the infected person, judging them for having multiple premarital sexual partners or having relations with sex workers. It becomes a daunting task for social workers to work against these misunderstandings, particularly while imparting the information in the Nepali language. One of the testimonials given by a Nepali AIDS prevention worker claims: "They don't even know what HIV is!" (Pigg 489). Schools have quizzes where they emphasise making students memorise the full form of the acronym AIDS but barely describe the disease. The awareness campaigns conducted by international health organisations do not have a significant impact on creating awareness using the Nepali language. When the same ideas are translated from English to Nepali, they have different connotations.

**Aayushma  
Adhikari**

This is an HIV-AIDS awareness poster written in Nepali:

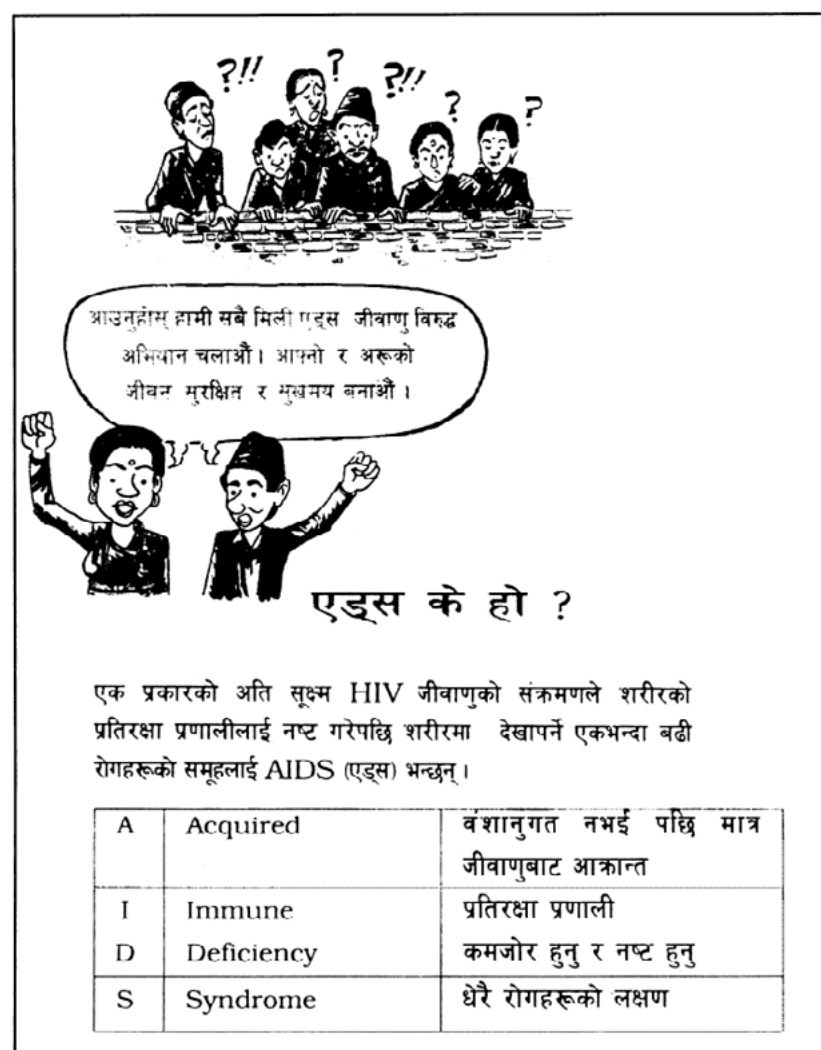


Fig: HIV-AIDS awareness poster in Nepal where each word in the acronym 'AIDS' is translated to Nepali (Pigg 491)

In this poster, there is no mention of HIV-AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease. There is a rather vague explanation of AIDS, which limits itself to the literal translation of each word in the acronym. However, the Nepali dictionary definitions of words such as “acquired”, “immune

system”, “syndrome”, and “virus” are not easily comprehensible even to well-educated people in Nepal. These are technical, medical terms which are not part of daily conversations. When translating technical terms into Nepali, there might be difficulty finding equivalent words that are commonly

understood. This is because of the historical disparity between the languages of the East and the West, resulting in variations in the availability of words to explain certain concepts (Pigg 490). Moreover, most Nepali citizens have very little exposure to English because their access to formal education and international media is limited by rural isolation, poverty, or both (Pigg 517). The term AIDS became colloquial due to its easy pronunciation, but the explanation always remained difficult to decipher using Nepali dictionary translations. In the picture with a dialogue box, it is written: “Let’s get together for a campaign to fight against this virus. Let’s make our and others’ lives safe and pleasant.” It calls for action from the people without specifying the role they can play in mitigating the spread of the disease. This poster shows the futility of the choice of words used to raise awareness against HIV-AIDS.

The discussions on Pigg’s paper took me back to 2012. A hefty young man (who I now recall and assume to be in his twenties) visited my father’s clinic. He eyed me sheepishly—a

teenager fidgeting with pens and markers across the counter. He had come to buy a pack of condoms, but he did not ask for it directly. He stood there for a while, looked at me and the woman behind the counter, and seemed anxious. My father came outside, and the man instantly asked, “*Sir dus ko dinu na, tyo*” (sir, give me that one worth ten). He never pointed at or stated what he wanted explicitly, but my father quickly understood and passed him a pack of condoms. While passing the packet, my father said, “*Panther ko dherai janchha bhai condom, yehi laga hai*” (Panther condoms sell more; take this one only, alright?). The customer nodded, paid with some change, and left the shop as quickly as possible. As a student in the eighth grade, barely equipped with sexual awareness and the knowledge of sexual diseases, I could only think of a television show produced by MaHa Sanchar, titled *Raat* (Night).

MaHa Sanchar, a media production house run by renowned actors Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansha Acharya, is known for raising awareness on social and



political issues through their satirical and humorous television programmes. *Raat* focuses on migrant workers from Nepal who are living in India, visiting brothels, and *bringing* HIV-AIDS to Nepal. I was uncertain of the significance of all that. They showed how people with HIV-AIDS were treated in the community—as untouchables, outcasts, and dangerous. The scene that I vividly remember had a woman who owned a brothel in India smoking a cigarette, pressing the stub against a female sex worker’s thigh, and ordering her to go and do what was asked of her. Then, the camera moved towards a drunk man waiting for her at the door. I remember scenes from a village in Nepal where a migrant worker who had returned from Mumbai (referred to as “Bambai”) was diagnosed with HIV-AIDS. All the villagers were hesitant to shake hands with him, go to other places with him, drink water from the well he touched, or help him when he needed dire medical attention

Eventually, the show conveyed that such discriminations were invalid

and one should rather help an HIV-infected person. They emphasised in the show that societal effort should be made towards providing medical attention and financial support, along with showing positive emotional responses to infected people. There was very little use of language that signalled that HIV-AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease. There were dialogues such as “*kamjori hunchha, garho huncha, sahayata dinu parchha*” (there will be weakness, it will be difficult, we should provide support), but they did not consider spreading awareness of having protected sex and being careful while having multiple sexual partners. By the end of the show, the impression on my mind was: “Oh, people coming from *Bambai* (Bombay) bring HIV-AIDS. We should never go to *Bambai*.” The question that I did not bother to raise was: “How does one catch AIDS?”

As I reflect on the show, I feel that since they never discussed sex and sexual health, it significantly affected the message of awareness that they were trying to convey

regarding a disease that primarily spreads through sexual intercourse. The show hesitated to discuss the sexual aspect of the disease as it is not a part of the daily conversations in Nepali communities, as evident from the conversation about buying condoms. People associate the language with their culture, and they believe that using certain words associated with sexual health in regular conversations reflects the “vulgarity” of their culture. They deliberately avoid using such words because they want to maintain a modest image of their culture. As Pigg observed in her work, language thus acts as a barrier to the effective spreading of awareness of HIV-AIDS.

Apart from the barrier posed by language use in daily conversations, the effective use of language by sex workers to promote safe sexual practices also plays a role in spreading awareness against AIDS. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) started a project called Saath-Saath in Nepal in 2012 to spread awareness of HIV-AIDS. Although the project covered many things, my

attention was drawn towards their training programme, in which they attempted to teach sex workers verbal negotiation skills to make their clients use condoms. I was curious to know the Nepali words at play they would teach for such negotiations. There are testimonials from female sex workers regarding their clients refusing to use condoms during intercourse. On the surface, it can be tied to the hesitance people feel while purchasing condoms because of the discomfort generated in the community pertaining to the discourse on sex. However, it is deeply related to the language that sex workers use for negotiation. The report of the Saath-Saath Project published for the year 2012–13 conveys that due to cultural, social, and economic constraints, it becomes difficult for a female sex worker to negotiate condom usage. It left me curious about these ‘constraints’. I wondered if the economic constraints could be the limited money available to the female sex workers with which they had to sustain themselves, sex work being the only source of income for them. The sex workers might hesitate to negotiate, given the financial risk

associated with losing a client.

I assume that the sociocultural aspects are: (a) male clients feeling that the power at their disposal is stronger as they can pay to get things done, (b) male clients feeling like they are entitled to the service because they have paid an ample amount of money for it, (c) female sex workers conforming to the proposals laid out by their clients in fear, (d) female sex workers belonging to marginalised communities, (e) female sex workers belonging to countries with less economic and political power in comparison to their clients, and (f) Nepali female sex workers in India who have been trafficked recently may not understand or speak Hindi (or other) languages spoken in India to negotiate. This points to how social and economic hierarchies might be reflected in the way that sex workers address their clients, which the project fails to report. It does not present details on the words used during such negotiation practice. If the choice of words used by the sex workers reflects their financial insecurity or social inferiority, the client might not

understand the importance of safe sexual practices. Missing information on visible results makes the comprehension of the effectiveness of such projects difficult. It also does not prove to be exemplary or inspirational for other projects of similar kinds to be conducted in the future.

Language acts both as a channel and a barrier to the effective spreading of awareness concerning sexual health. While we understand this, we must also understand that language is not merely a tool for communication but a vessel through which we perceive and construct reality. While discussing AIDS, television shows must provide information regarding sexual health, and posters must address concepts beyond the literal translation of medical terms. Projects for teaching negotiation skills to sex workers must emphasise ensuring clarity in their language regarding the necessity of protective sex. Moreover, the language used for negotiation must transcend the socio-economic hierarchy that may be present between the sex worker and the client. These will ensure higher efficiency

in the spread of awareness regarding AIDS while shaping the way we think about the disease in the first place. We understand that language holds the capacity to create a cognitive space where it becomes easy to understand meaning without necessarily using words but associating meaning with them. In the context of spreading awareness about HIV-AIDS, we can observe the inefficiency in achieving the same despite having specific words to describe the disease and its mode of transmission. A thought to ponder upon here is whether or not cultural influence supersedes the cognitive influence of language in individuals.

## Works Cited

- Pigg, Stacy Leigh. "Languages of Sex and AIDS in Nepal: Notes on the Social Production of Commensurability." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2001, pp. 481–541. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656647>. Accessed 5 January 2023.
- Maha Sanchar Nepal Pvt. Ltd. "Episode 1." *Raat*. *YouTube*, 25 Sept. 2020, <https://youtu.be/KZgq7Sylr4Y>.
- Maha Sanchar Nepal Pvt. Ltd. "Episode 2." *Raat*. *YouTube*, 25 Sept. 2020, <https://youtu.be/GxmOHzMnFXg>.
- Saath-Saath Project. *Saath-Saath Project: Annual Report August (2012–July 2013)*. *USAID*, 2013, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00JHHT.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00JHHT.pdf). Accessed 15 April 2023.
- Suvedi, B. K. et al. "HIV/AIDS in Nepal: An Update." *JNMA; Journal of the Nepal Medical Association*, vol. 32, no. 111, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1994, pp. 204–13, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12154942/>. Accessed 15 April 2023.
- Poudel, A. K. Narayan et al. "Economic Burden of HIV/AIDS upon Households in Nepal: A Critical Review." *Nepal Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 5, no. 3, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2015, pp. 502–10, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26913211/>. Accessed 15 April 2023.

## The Normalization of Rape: Interrogating State Impunity in the Bilkis Bano Case

### Anseena

Anseena is a YIF 2023 graduate. She has done her undergraduation in Political Science from Miranda House, Delhi University. She is an aspiring researcher in the field of Anthropology and Sociology. Her academic interests include violence and law in India, Muslim women and property, Muslim women and the public sphere, Muslim women and piety, matriliney and Islamic law.

An introvert by nature, Anseena finds solace in the company of feline friends. An ardent admirer of Malayalam writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, she often finds herself immersed in his works, revisiting them time and again. As a self-proclaimed foodie with an insatiable sweet tooth, she enjoys exploring various culinary delights. Anseena holds a strong aspiration to contribute meaningfully to academia while nurturing her intellectual curiosity.



The understanding of rape as a weapon against “minority” communities has been instrumental to the analysis of communal violence in India, a theme various scholars have extensively explored. Scholars Veena Das (1996) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998) emphasize the gendered nature of communal violence and its impact on women within these communities, while Tanika Sarkar (2002) delves into the historical implications of connecting women’s bodies to the idea of the Indian nation. Urvashi Butalia (1993) focuses on the documentation of survivors’ narratives, offering insights into the lived experience of those affected by communal strife during the Partition, and Pratiksha Baxi (2007) critiques the legal framework surrounding sexual violence in such contexts. In fact, addressing the significance of rape in communal violence, Das argues that “sexual violence against women is constitutive of social and political disorder in India” (2411). Further, she argues that during communal strife, men use women’s bodies as a medium

of communication. For example, during Partition, the perpetrators of communal riots carved “Jai Hind” and “Jai Pakistan” on women’s bodies as a way to send messages to the other community (Das 2411). In many other communal instances across the world and in India, this practice of sending a message through women’s bodies has ensued.

However, in recent times, considerable differences have been observed in the development of communal politics, particularly in the politicisation of rape by certain forces and agents of Hindu nationalism. The critical scholarship on the issue increasingly highlights how the rise of majoritarianism in India has transformed rape into a collective action where the perpetrators of sexual violence against women from minority communities are publicly and judicially supported, whereas the suffering and trauma of the victims have been blatantly neglected. Drawing on critical scholarship on this issue, this paper contends that it is the overt support of state machinery for the perpetrators of rape against

women of minority communities that justify the violence by a communal collective, and the culture of state impunity contributes to the normalisation of rape in Indian society. This paper delves into this argument by examining the case of sexual violence against Bilkis Bano and the apparent lack of judicial and popular support she received for her case.

### Rape as a Political Tool in India

The instrumentalisation of collective rape in communal violence underscores the wider sociopolitical dimensions at play in any given society. Sexual violence serves as a tool for ethnic cleansing aimed at dishonouring and subjugating an entire community. Tanika Sarkar, in her analysis of communal violence, refers to rape as a “collective dishonouring”—a form of revenge against the enemy for their perceived past wrongdoings (2875). This is done because rape in communal violence is legitimised as “conquering” or “claiming” women’s bodies as “territories” (Menon and Bhasin 43). As women’s bodies are viewed as an embodiment of lineage and

community honour in India, when a woman is raped, it represents the violation and pollution of her entire community (Sarkar 2875). Here, the act of violence in the form of rape is justified by desecrating the marks of honour of the “other” community, the enemy, transforming sexual violence into a “ritual of victory” (Aggarwal 31).

Legal scholar Pratiksha Baxi has observed a shift in the understanding of rape, viewing it as a form of “political violence” and questioning the law for its role in “transforming rape into sex” (Baxi, “Rape, Retribution, State” 1196). This perspective critiques conventional notions of rape, where the court turns the rape into a “confession of consensual sex” (Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law* xxvi) through scientific and medical means. Sexual violence against minority communities is justified and reinforced in the name of the law itself. Baxi, by reviewing the appellate judgements of communal riots, argues that a “Kafkaesque testimonial condition” is created for survivors by the “power of state law” (Baxi, “Adjudicating the Riot” 67). Further,

Baxi analyses six characteristics of the judicial discourse on communal violence. First, the discourse classifies riots through practices attributing the “*failure of law*” to the “*nature*” of “mob” violence. Second, blame is placed on survivor communities by calling them the “provocateurs”. Third, there is a tendency to suppress the individual experience of violence by the survivors. This is achieved through the assimilation of specific forms of violence into a framework deemed typical of a riot, accompanied by the denial of other forms of violence inherent to the nature of communal riots. Fourth, it places accountability on communities engaged in an unequal exchange of violence. Fifth, the discourse highlights the state’s failure to contain communal violence while neglecting its role in allowing illegal violence during communal riots. Finally, Baxi draws attention to the dual characterisation of communal riots as offences against public tranquillity in the Indian Penal Code and as acts of terror under special legal provisions.

These characteristics underscore

the biases and failures within the legal system, which are particularly pertinent in cases of violence during communal riots. Here, we can see the irony of the law being selectively protective and dismissive to women from the minority community. On the one hand, one can see the ‘femonational’ agenda of the Hindu nationalists to ‘protect’ Muslim women from Muslim men and Islam. On the other hand, in the cases of Asifa Bano and Bilkis Bano, the state “dismissed” the victims and protected the convicts through its own machinery. In the realm of gender justice, the Hindu nationalist government aligns with what Sara R. Farris termed “femonationalism”, a concept denoting the ‘exploitation’ of feminist narratives for political ends. This aligns with the Triple Talaq and Shah Bano cases, where the state positions itself as a protector of Muslim women from perceived threats by patriarchal Muslim men. Femonationalism involves not only the co-optation of feminist themes by nationalists but also the active involvement of feminists in stigmatising Muslim men in the name of gender equality (Farris

3). Here, the state positions itself as a protector, saving Muslim women from the perceived threats posed by patriarchal Muslim men and Islamic practices. At the same time, the Asifa Bano and Bilkis Bano cases exemplify this paradox, wherein the state, guided by Hindu nationalism, selectively protects convicts. Here, sexual violence emerges as a political tool, and the law appears to be “mutable” for the interests of Hindu nationalism. This demonstrates that the state machinery sanctions the interests of Hindu nationalism.

Dibyesh Anand views Hindu nationalism in India as a “chauvinist and majoritarian” nationalism that portrays a contrast between the “peaceful Hindu Self” and a “threatening minority Other” (1). Further, this narrative fictitiously creates an image of the supposed over-fertility of Muslim women and the virility of Muslim men, which is the subject of a “dark sexual obsession that feeds fear and revenge fantasies” (Sarkar 2874). While Muslim men are seen as a threat to both Muslim and Hindu women, Hindu nationalism

in India views the bodies of Muslim women as sites for carrying out the violence and revenge of Hindu men. As Megha Kumar points out, aiming for revenge and preventing future aggression, the Hindu nationalist ideologue V.D. Savarkar wanted Hindu men to develop more physical and sexual prowess. For the Hindu men to publicly humiliate Muslim men and proclaim their return to power, Savarkar promotes the use of rape as a weapon in communal violence (Kumar 43). The Gujarat Pogrom was one of the instances where rape was weaponised as a tool for ethnic cleansing and revenge. As Tanika Sarkar observes, the Gujarat violence had a “dark sexual” obsession with the female body demonstrated through serial violence on their genital organs (2874). Martha Nussbaum, in her article ‘Why Women Were Mutilated in Gujarat’, quotes:

The violence in Gujarat was different from earlier incidents of communal violence, both for the scale of the assaults and for the sheer sadism and brutality with which women and girls

were victimised. Bilkis Bano was one of the victims of this heinous violence.

### The Case of Bilkis Bano

Bilkis Bano was pregnant when she was gang-raped during the Gujarat carnage in 2002. Fourteen members of her family were killed, including her three-year-old daughter. All the men who raped Bano knew her directly from childhood. They even included an old man who used to buy milk from her home, whom they called *chacha* (uncle). They were the ones who took the baby from Bilkis' arms, beat her to the ground, and killed her. Upon regaining consciousness, Bano found herself naked amidst the lifeless bodies of her family. A tribal woman later dressed her before she courageously went to the police station alone, naming those who attacked her (Seetalvad, "In Her Own Words")(Maktoob Malayalam, "Why Bilkis is Not Called India's Daughter").

After six years of legal battles, in 2008, the court sentenced the 11 convicts in the case to life imprisonment. On the 75th

anniversary of India's independence in 2022, a Gujarat government panel granted the request for the mass remission of the 11 convicts sentenced to life for their sexual violence against Bilkis Bano. Moreover, instead of recognising the survivor's historic struggle against mass rape and murder and her unflinching faith in the judiciary, many, including women, celebrated the release of the convicts. In fact, scenes of them being honoured and garlanded were reported widely. Bano expressed that the decision to release her rapists had left her feeling "numb" and had severely shaken her trust in the justice system. In response, Bano then approached the Supreme Court challenging their release. The decision was taken in accordance with the 1992 remission policy that was in effect in Gujarat at the time of their conviction in 2008. A revised policy was introduced in 2014, which would have made their release under the 1992 policy impossible. However, their remission was granted under the earlier policy. Bano contended that the State of Maharashtra's current remission policy should be

applicable in this instance, as opposed to Gujarat's 1992 remission policy, because the trial for this case took place in Maharashtra ("Bilkis Bano Gang-Rape Case"; Baxi, "Pratiksha Baxi Writes").

Bano expressed her deep dissatisfaction with this decision. The sense of public morality and resentment towards this release and injustice to the victim is largely absent in the case of the Bilkis Bano rape case. Videos have been uploaded on social media where the release of the rapists is being celebrated outside the Godhra jail while relatives give them sweets and touch their feet with respect. A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) who was part of the state government panel advocating for the remission of the rapists has said that the rapists are Brahmins with good values (Baxi, "Pratiksha Baxi Writes"). There is a kind of visible social sanction of the injustice against Bilkis Bano, where what Achille Mbembe calls the "ceremonies of *commandment*" is noticeable (emphasis in original) (114–115). Mbembe refers to the public

displays organised by the state to reinforce and redistribute its power. In these ceremonies, the bodies of individuals are "requisitioned" to participate in public displays, such as singing, dancing, or other performative acts. Mbembe describes these displays as a way for the state to assert its authority and make a spectacle of the bodies involved. The emphasis is on the performative aspect, where bodies become part of a spectacle that serves to reaffirm and redistribute state power. This redistribution is not only confined to the institutional level but also extends to broader society through mass support and participation. In the case of Bano, the visible social sanction of injustice involves a spectacular celebration of the release of her perpetrators. The act is not only orchestrated by the state but also involves mass support and participation, creating a broader societal endorsement of the injustice.

Unlike the widespread public outrage witnessed in the aftermath of the rape of Jyoti Singh, which has been termed the Nirbhaya case, the case of Bilkis Bano was met with selective



amnesia. Despite the heinous nature of the crime she endured, there was a noticeable absence of attention in both public discourse and mainstream feminist narratives. Bano, unfortunately, was not accorded the title of “India’s daughter”, and her story garnered less collective outrage due to her social location as a Muslim woman. In the case of Bano, finally overturning the remission of her perpetrators, even the Supreme Court admitted that some convicts are “more privileged”, unlike other convicts (“In This Case, Convicts Had Privilege of Coming Out”).

### **State Impunity: Legitimising Violence, the Faceless Mob, and Collective Anger**

The mass remission of Bilkis Bano’s perpetrators represents a culture of state impunity that provides a sanction to the violence that was unleashed against women from minority communities. Achille Mbembe has argued that post-colonial states inherit a system of “colonial sovereignty” marked by arbitrary actions and an unconditional approach, with a “regime of impunity”

being a natural consequence (26). In fact, subsequent scholars have theorised that impunity is inherent in all forms of authority, and the desire for impunity characterises the exercise of power, making it desirable and appealing (Geetha 15). By considering the interconnected roles of “state documentary practices” and “proceduralism”, as articulated by Chatterjee (120), a more comprehensive analysis of how impunity operates within the broader context of state authority can be understood.

In his ethnographic study of the court proceedings of the Gujarat pogrom, Moyukh Chatterjee observes that the lawyers representing the Hindu defendants raised their voices towards witnesses while the public prosecutor consistently took a position against the victims. He detailed the “impunity effect” of the state where it takes on the work of officially documenting acts of violence, achieving a dual purpose: “acknowledging the enormity of the violence” *and* preventing “anyone from being held individually liable for

it” (123). Here, too, the state’s ability to weaponise official documents to challenge and discredit the testimonies of witnesses is illustrated. The official documents (because they are associated with evidence and transparency) themselves are relied on by the state to “dissolve responsibility, produce indeterminacy, and perpetuate structural violence” (123). In the case of the Gujarat carnage, the police instituted “various official writing techniques” in order to present a pogrom on Muslim minorities as a “communal riot” between Hindus and Muslims. The police report conveniently obscures specific individuals or a common target. It describes “unknown mobs” engaging in looting and destruction without acknowledging that these actions disproportionately affected Muslims. The report obscures individual incidents of targeted violence, creating a disconnect between collective violence and individual complaints, thereby effectively rendering the violence “faceless” (124). Victims had to watch their cases being deferred endlessly. Many times, Muslim women survivors were able to identify

the accused individuals, who were not anonymous and thus could be specifically identified. However, the judge deemed the testimonies of the Muslim witnesses as unreliable (Chatterjee 123).

This paper contends that the notion of a faceless mob and its collective anger helps to obscure the visible actors of violence, ultimately perpetrating the idea that no one is responsible for rape, riots, arson, or looting. This obfuscation of the rioters helps them walk scot-free and continues the perpetuation and normalisation of violence. Baxi has observed the “systemic failure” in documenting the testimonies of women who have survived rape in the context of a riot (Baxi, “Adjudicating the Riot” 79). However, in the case of Bilkis Bano, even when the survivor’s testimony resulted in a conviction, the state allowed them to go unpunished through its machinery. In this situation, there is no ambiguity about the identity of those responsible, as the state is aware of it.

In conclusion, rape has been reinforced and redefined as political

violence against women in different contexts. Here, I have interrogated the state impunity discourses and practices as it played out in the Bilkis Bano case's judicial processes. Contrary to the argument put forth by various scholars that communal violence is the work of an anonymous mob—which is characterised as spontaneous and irregular—I argue that in the case of Bilkis Bano, there is a shift in the state's judicial processes. The perpetrators were known and visible to the state, yet the state allowed them to be free, necessitating the Supreme Court's intervention. Notwithstanding this intervention, the state's response to this case has unfortunately ensured the continuation of sexual violence in India producing sanction for and normalising it.

## Works Cited

- Aggarwal, Purushottam. "Savarkar, Surat and Draupadi." *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, Zed Books, 1995, pp. 28–57.
- Anand, Dibyesh. *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Baxi, Pratiksha. "Rape, Retribution, State: on Whose Bodies?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no. 14, 2000, pp. 1196–1200.
- . "Adjudicating the Riot: Communal Violence, Crowds and Public Tranquility in India." *Domains (Special Issue): Riot Discourses*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 66–101.
- . *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- "Bilkis Bano Gang-Rape Case: Convicts Walk out of Jail under Remission Policy." Maktoob Media, 16 August 2022, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/bilkis-bano-gang-rape-case-convicts-walk-out-of-jail-under-remission-policy/>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.
- "Bilkis Bano Moves Supreme Court Challenging Release of 11 Convicts". *Maktoob Media*, 30 November 2022, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/bilkis-bano-moves-supreme-court-challenging-release-of-11-convicts/>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.
- Butalia, Urvashi. "Community, State, and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 17, 1993, pp. WS-12-WS-24.
- Chatterjee, Moyukh. "The Impunity Effect: Majoritarian Rule, Everyday Legality, and State Formation in India." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 118–130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12430>.
- Chatterji, Roma, and Deepak Mehta. *Living with Violence: An Anthropology of Events*

*and Everyday Life*. Routledge, 2020.

Das, Veena. "Sexual Violence, Discursive Formations and the State." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 31, no. 35/37, 1996, pp. 2411–2423.

Farris, Sara R. *In the Name of Women's Rights*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Geetha, V. "On Impunity." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2013, pp. 15–17.

Gupta, Pallavi, Banu Gökarkısel, and Sara Smith. "The Politics of Saving Muslim Women in India: Gendered Geo Legality, Security, and Territorialization." *Political Geography*, vol. 83, 2020, pp. 1–10.

"In this Case, Convicts Had Privilege of Coming out...': Supreme Court on Bilkis Bano case." *Maktoob Media*, 15 September 2023, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/in-this-case-convicts-had-privilege-of-coming-out-supreme-court-on-bilkis-bano-case/>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

Kumar, Megha. *Communal Riots, Sexual Violence and Hindu Nationalism in Post-Independence Gujarat* (1969–2002). Diss., Oxford University, UK, 2009.

Maktoob Malayam [@maktoob.malayalam]. "Why Bilkis is not called India's daughter". Instagram, 9 Jan. 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C14eKKtsrs/?igsh=MTc4Y3Z6eHVkb2R4Ng%3D%3D&img\\_index=2](https://www.instagram.com/p/C14eKKtsrs/?igsh=MTc4Y3Z6eHVkb2R4Ng%3D%3D&img_index=2).

Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.

Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Body of the Nation: Why Women Were Mutilated in Gujarat." *Boston Review*, 1 June 2004, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/martha-nussbaum-women-mutilated-gujarat/>. Accessed 28 Mar. 2023.

"Pratiksha Baxi Writes: Mass Remission for Bilkis Bano Case Convicts Is an Act of Symbolic Violence". *Indian Express*, 13 September 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/mass-remission-for-bilkis-bano-case-convicts-is-an-act-of-symbolic-violence-8147189/>. Accessed

15 Mar. 2023.

Sarkar, Tanika. "Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtra." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 28, 2002, pp. 2872–2876.

Seetalvad, Teesta. "In Her Own Words: What Bilkis Bano Went Through in 2002". *The Wire*, 09 Jan. 2024, <https://thewire.in/rights/in-her-own-words-what-bilkis-bano-went-through-in-2002>. Accessed 07 Mar. 2023.

"Undo this Harm, Give Me Back My Right to Live: Bilkis Bano after Release of ~A". *Maktoob Media*, 18 August 2022, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/undo-this-harm-give-me-back-my-right-to-live-bilkis-bano-after-release-of-rape-convicts/>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2023.





**Illustration 3:** *Redirection*

A reimagination, a possibility, a hope of life taking over an infallible structure.



# Something in the Water: Water and Madness in “Dream of the Golden Mahseer”

**Mukul Bhatt**

Although Mukul has been an avid reader of non-fiction of many kinds, his writing was confined to academic pursuits. The humanities education during the YIF critical writing program served a dual purpose. First, it introduced to him the art of writing as intellectual training, rather than a mere assemblage of thoughts. Second, it fostered metacognition, making him conscious of the origins and impact of writing. It has slowly begun to integrate with his expression of the self and a praxis of his ethical impulse. Inspired by Spivak’s theory of “affirmative sabotage,” his aim is to turn his writing purposeful in training the imagination in a power-critical manner.

Mukul is formally educated in social sciences research. He is drawn to continental philosophy, critical theory, Marxism, and post-colonial studies. His leisure time is spent in thinking, which he often finds illuminating. At the time of this publication, he is finishing his Master’s in Liberal Studies with a specialization in Politics and History at Ashoka University, alongside his role as a researcher at Sparx Impact, Bangalore.

“... madness is the flowing liquid exterior of rocky reason.”  
—Michel Foucault, “L’eau et la folie”

## Introduction

Janice Pariat’s 2012 short story, “Dream of the Golden Mahseer,” tells the story of Mama Kyn, a World War II veteran suffering from war trauma, his descent into madness, and his eventual death. In the story, the metaphor of water is a recurring motif through which madness seeps into his life. This water motif, both literally and metaphorically, has often been linked to human subjectivity and madness. During the Renaissance, madness was seen as part of human nature, including folly and irrationality, alongside reason. However, the subsequent early modern period (1660–1900) changed the meaning of madness and unreason by making it the dialogic other to a society based on reason and rationality.

This paper argues that the Renaissance understanding of madness still exists symbolically,

particularly in the characteristic fluidity of water, which represents madness’s rebellion against reason and rationality. Through an interpretation of the metaphor of water in the story, this paper attempts to link Mama Kyn’s madness, and in turn, the experience of madness in general, to the several transgressions of structures, realities, and conformities. If reason and rationality define themselves through the boundary of sanity, excluding unreason, fluidity, uncertainty, rebellion, and infiniteness, the excluded, of which water becomes the common signifier, also then challenge the limits of sanity

The paper begins by exploring the different qualities and ensuing meanings that construct the water motif in theory and literature. Subsequently, a summary of Pariat’s story and its underlying themes and motives is provided. Then, the paper focuses on Mama Kyn’s descent into madness, aiming to show the metaphorical significance of water in the story. It demonstrates how water’s fluidity, uncertainty, and unknowability parallel the experience of madness.

**Mukul  
Bhatt**

In the next section, the analysis elucidates how the sublime materiality of water parallels a profound truth that Mama Kyn discovers. This truth is accessible only through the subjective experience of madness. It also examines how folkloric reality grants agency to the mad, allowing them to pursue this truth—an insight partially glimpsed by Aaron, Mama Kyn’s young nephew. Towards the conclusion, a contemplative Aaron recognises the transgressive potential inherent in Mama Kyn’s madness. Ultimately, this analysis presents the pursuit of a new truth by the mad as a challenge and rebellion against conventional reality and rationality. It stands as an alternative to the ‘violence of reason’ that excludes any other experience as insane.

### **The Motif of Water**

In what ways is water linked to our lives and subjectivities? Water as an essential element has been used and interpreted in so many ways that its meaning has become liquid as well. Advocating a post-human feminist “watered” subjectivity, the cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis

lists six integral traits of water. She calls them “hydro-logics” (29). To begin with, humans take birth in the gestational waters of the womb. This is the gestational fact that Neimanis considers the first trait of water. After birth, human bodies consist of 70 percent water. In Hindu mythology, water is seen as the foundation of the whole world, the basis of life, and the elixir of immortality. It is also seen as a medium of purification (Singh 210). In Christianity, a child is baptised by the holy water. Foucault discovers water’s purificatory role in the context of the vagabond madmen who were driven away from the cities of Europe and sent to the oceans in the “ship of fools”.

Navigation made him [the madman] a prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this the dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last.

(Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 11).

Water’s second trait, for Neimanis, is the capacity to dissolve, which gives it immense power to transform. In Hinduism, the last remains of the body are released in the flowing river water, which is constantly in flux. The dissolved ashes represent a transformation of the body into a transcendental omnipresence made possible by water. The third trait is water’s use as a medium of communication: “[The] flow and flush of waters sustain our bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, the lifeworld and our environment—drinking, urinating, sweating, transfusing, ejaculating, siphoning, sponging, weeping” (31). The fourth trait is differentiation: all planetary water serves as a connector while each of its forms expresses difference. The planetary water in circulation is closed, but each materialisation of water produces something new. Fifth is water as memory, that is, the hydrological archive. Water remembers not only the glaciers, deep lakes, and other

stagnancies but also the waste generated by humans, and becomes a material repository of the past. Finally, water has the logic of unknowability. What will come next cannot be anticipated; it is always uncertain. This inability to “anticipate what will come next is at the very heart of Darwinian evolution...and water’s proliferative capacity” and “[s]ince the plurality of future watery bodies is inexhaustible, water is also ultimately unknowable” (32).

In the early modern period, men were sent afar to the waters not only to discover but also to be treated. Foucault talks about the madman being “delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything... He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage.... One thing at least is certain: water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man” (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 11). This dream is neither only Western nor only dreamt by men. In the following centuries up until now, it has



percolated into the collective psyche of worlds near and far. By virtue of the material fact of its liquidity, which is experienced by all, it renders itself visible in the metaphor, literature, myth, doctrine, and folklore of various cultures of the world.

In Western life and literature, water has also found a unique association with the feminine. Anything unknown, external, alien, heterogenous, unreasonable, uncontrollable, and fluid is often ascribed to the feminine. The construction of madness as a female malady in 19th-century England and France (Showalter, *The Female Malady*) is a primary case in point. In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, when Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic", ultimately meets her tragic end and jumps to her death, she does so into a body of water. In the novel's feminist prequel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys makes several references to the water in relation to the condition of the madwoman, including in the title itself (Luo 1222). Virginia Woolf, a prolific writer but also a woman troubled by her own neurosis, drowned herself in

water to end her life. In many such works and incidents as the ones mentioned above, water symbolises freedom, rebellion, and fluidity; and, therefore, a possibility of authenticity and agency for women. The feminine experience is mad because it is an out-of-world experience, exterior to patriarchal and gendered reality. The feminine, in this sense, represents the liquid binary "other" to an apparently solid masculine world.

### **The Themes of "Dream of the Golden Mahseer"**

The narrative opens with a curious and disenchanted Aaron reflecting on his upbringing in a spacious home near Shillong's IewDuh market. Within this Khasi tribal household, he recalls the presence of his extended family, including his two uncles, Mama Heh and Mama Kyn, both war veterans. Having suffered and survived the horrific experiences of the Second World War, Mama Heh fell victim to alcohol, while Mama Kyn was "taken by the fairies"—a fate brought intertwined with his madness (Pariat 63). The narrative unfolds from young Aaron's perspective, recounting Mama

Kyn's gradual transformation from a silent presence to his extended absences from the household. Meanwhile, Aaron cherished his discussions with Mama Kyn about fishing and rivers, which showcased to Aaron his distinct comprehension of the world. However, Mama Kyn's disappearances grew longer, and after a two-day absence, he was discovered perilously perched near a waterfall. When Aaron questioned him about his absence, he described how he caught the Golden Mahseer with his bare hands at the waterfall. The episodes of disappearance continued until one day he disappeared forever.

Aaron refuses to believe the rational explanation that it was diabetic hallucinations that drove Mama Kyn mad. The story, with its sceptical view of reality, narrated through Aaron, problematises the idea of madness. The "*Lah Kem Puri*", the water fairies that seem to have enchanted Mama Kyn, are construed by fellow tribesmen to be the reason for his disappearance. In this diagnosis, which is declared and accepted by

most people present around him at the moment, the madness is explained through a folkloric reality in which the folklore rids the mad from the onus of his madness to something external. In other words, madness has a space to exist within the Khasi folkloric reality. It does not construct a binary of madness and sanity, where madness is understood as external—something that does not belong. It is demonstrated below how water epitomises the dissolution of neat binaries and a certain embrace of ambiguity and fluidity in the story. For Foucault, too, the mad person dissolves binaries by being in a liminal space. Talking of the condition of madmen in the middle ages that continues to haunt us in modernity, he analyses the treatment and symbolic position of the mad in the liminal zone—"the exterior of the interior, and inversely" (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 11). The story attempts to question this binary politics in many forms, such as sanity and insanity, folkloric and rational, and masculine and feminine. Mama Kyn's madness represents the exterior of society where, like water, it can transgress

established boundaries, juxtaposed against the solid structure of the internal world.

### **The Motif of Madness**

Aaron and Mama Kyn's bond starts when Aaron enquires about the biggest fish he has ever caught. In his answer, the usually silent and aloof Mama Kyn recalls the exact day and the river where he had caught it. Upon further enquiry from Aaron, he opens up about his knowledge of all the rivers in the vicinity and their characteristic qualities. In his recollection, he talks about the rivers as though they are entities full of life, with characteristics similar to humans: the Lai Lad river is unpredictable, the Subansiri is complacently calm, and the Ranikor is the wild child. Mama Kyn has an intimacy and familiarity with the rivers, like that of an old lover. This way of talking about living rivers may have been common among the tribal fisherfolk, but it also becomes the gateway through which Mama Kyn lets Aaron into his reality and opens up about the horrors of war, which no one in the family knows about. He recalls Tripoli, where Mama Kyn's

platoon mates were calling him names for not going up on a tank for a drink, only to get liquidated in a moment by a sudden bomb. He could have been one of them if it was any other day, but that day, he forbade himself for no apparent reason. Having seen the volatility of life laid bare before him, the uncertainty, awe, and dread deeply register themselves on Mama Kyn's psyche.

For Mama Kyn, the living rivers are the natural sublime. As much as he is mesmerised by their beauty, he also immediately cautions against the fear and devastation that the rivers can and have caused. The exploration of this sublime and the experience of it becomes a part of his quest, where he often disappears in search of the Golden Mahseer. When he disappears, and there is a search for him the first time, he is found sitting on a rock facing the waterfall, staring into a certain nothingness. The liquid sublime, which is experienced in a state of ungovernable flux, represents terror, awe, uncertainty, vastness, and potential death, all of which Mama Kyn experienced when the bomb

dropped. Water becomes an emblem of all the horrors that Mama Kyn has experienced.

There is a method to Mama Kyn's madness, which can be recovered by seeing the world from his perspective. Mama Kyn tells young Aaron, "I'm catching the Golden Mahseer ... flying through the air, leaping into water" (Pariat 78). The constant flux of the Mahseer fish is made clear when he says, "I reach out, one after another" (78). Mama Kyn is caught in the flux of failing to perform the normalcy of life ever since his horrendous experiences of the trauma of war. The trauma pulls him back, just like the water that keeps calling him back. One moment after another, in the fluidity of such an existence, he finds himself always at the nothingness of life.

### **The Motif as Transgressive Truth**

The logic of the mad is shaped by a perception that risks sanity. The instant liquidation of bodies in the war revealed the spontaneity of life and arbitrariness of death to Mama Kyn. This fundamental truth of

life's uncertainty remains crouched and hidden in social life through rituals and belief systems. Birth and death are explained through some transcendental or internal logic that gives one a sense of meaning. However, in war, when there is no body to cremate or bury and no one to perform the rituals, the truth lays itself bare. Mama Kyn's war-ridden subjectivity becomes a beholder of this fundamental truth with which he can never make peace. The encounter with this truth makes everything else—the material reality, his family, and his tribe—a falsity.

However, the same subjectivity also struggles to find a transgressive meaning of life in a world that includes this contradictory truth—to live with the impossibility of knowing whether you will live the next moment. The dream of the Golden Mahseer becomes the reality of Mama Kyn. A reality in which the Mahseer are all around him, always flopping and slipping away one after the other. He finds them on his hands like "pieces of the sun" (Pariat 78): a sun that shines like the truth. This fluidity, uncertainty,

and nothingness of life are not for the sane community—it is a truth that is only experienced and lived by the union of the sublime materiality of water and the mad transgressive subjectivity of Mama Kyn. For the Khasi tribe, the *Lah Kem Puri*, the water fairies, are the reason for Mama Kyn's madness. The onus of the madness is shifted to the water fairies who embody/represent the feminine mystique: "[B]eautiful creatures ... [who] have waist long hair and skin the color of moonlight" (74). For Mama Kyn, the water and the feminine become the avenues of a new truth, freedom, and rebellion.

The realisation that the feminine fairies—the "Puris"—have possessed Mama Kyn is followed by the declaration that the episodes of disappearance will never stop now. The family has believers of both kinds. There are members of the older generation, like Mena, who believe in folklore, and there are people, like Uncle Gordon and Aaron's mother, who do not. However different one might find the two views—rational and folkloric—both are complicit

in the silence around Mama Kyn's condition. However, through the Khasi community, this personal silence of the individuals does not mean that nothing was being done collectively. Search parties were looking for him out in the open, and they found him repeatedly.

Nonetheless, "there is a pretense of normality along with the waiting that follows as soon as he disappears" (Pariat 75). Everyone saw it coming, and Mama Kyn was already considered a lost cause. Care is provided to him as a family member, but nothing is done to try to make his condition better, perhaps because nothing could have been done. The Khasi ritual belief, that is, the placement of the broom by the door, is carried out till the end in the hopes of guarding the mad Mama Kyn. This idea of having a protective shield around him through the broom shows how the act of care and protection is relegated to this object and, in turn, wished for Mama Kyn. It would not have been possible to guard someone 24 hours a day forever, but while they kept him in check during the daytime,

perhaps by sending Aaron to him, they also allowed him the freedom to go outside. He is protected but not confined in the name of protection. This agency, still conferred to the mad even after incidents of disappearance, illustrates how Khasi folkloric reality makes space for the experience of madness.

After the final disappearance of Mama Kyn, everyone keeps questioning each other about who removed the broom from his door, including the non-believers in folklore, like Gordon and Aaron's mother. Aaron's realisation, which becomes the paramount voice of suspicion in the face of failure, is starkly clear. He says, "Nobody thought of the possibility that he'd done so himself. No one saw how the broom probably didn't keep anything away" (Pariat 76). Aaron can say this only because he is the one who knew Mama Kyn's truth and had seen a glimpse of his world. In retrospect, his rational judgement could tell how Mama Kyn, in search of freedom through the Golden Mahaseer, could have been suicidal. To be clear, in the rational paradigm,

there is still debate and increasing consensus about whether someone can be given the agency to take their own life, but the folkloric reality has already solved this in its own way. It respects the agency of the mad. It does not restrict, but it protects until the point where there is no protection possible. Mama Kyn was cared for and brought back home several times, which might not have been the case in rational systems where such actions are relegated to the police or the hospital. Perhaps only through this community effort, for the first and last time, Mama Kyn was able to show his truth to one person.

Towards the end of the story, a meditative Aaron visits his childhood home. Thinking of his childhood, he asks certain existential questions, and also questions the binary of the ordinary/real and the mythic. "Is it right to cling so fiercely to the world?" he asks (Pariat 77). This ontological inquiry, which opens a possibility of transgression, is only made possible when he is sitting on the bank and wading into the water, expecting to glimpse something wondrous. At the



same time, he experiences the natural sublime in its full might in the distant hills and their saddening silence and then in the trembling shadows of the trees. “All voices are heard in a river’s murmuring”, he says (78). The biological fact of water as the life force, and also a testament to life’s spontaneity, is reaffirmed through the metaphor.

### Conclusion

In a paper titled “Responsibility”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak looks at a development project in Bangladesh that involved major rerouting of deltaic watercourses in an effort to mitigate flood hazards. She sees it as violence done to the rivers—an attempt to control, limit, and define them that is akin to “the violence of Reason itself” (62). This control has also been attempted on the fluidity of madness and its allied transgressions. The connection made in the paper between madness and water as exterior to solid reason makes sense in this context. This symbolism applies to any consolidation of people, community, or ideas. As such, any consolidation always excludes

other people/ideas who are then left outside, that nonetheless haunts the stability of such consolidation, marking a universal politics of the interior defined by its dialogic exterior.

Through uncovering links between madness and water, the exploration above also points out the potential that the metaphor of water has to grasp the Renaissance truth of madness, where reason and unreason are both seen as part of a human nature that is continuously fluid. The values of water—uncertainty, flux, fluidity—are relegated to the unknown, exterior, alien category of the other that has to be tamed by an interior reason by the values of modernity. Still, the tamed will be unleashed time and again. As Neimanis remarks, “We cannot master that which we cannot bear. In this way, the grammar of water necessarily rejects total knowledge or full control by anybody” (32). Water, being the liquid exterior, stays liminal and seeps through the watertight interior in one way or another—sometimes through a flood and sometimes through a Mama Kyn or an Aaron.

## Works Cited

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Editions, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. “L’eau et la folie.” *Dits et Ecrits*. Translated by Clara O’Farrell. vol. 1, Gallimard, 1994, p. 268.
- . *Madness and Civilization*. Translated by Richard Howard. Vintage Books, 1988.
- Hubert, Penelope. *The Sublime: Water, Flux and Duality*. 2011. The University of Wollongong, Master’s dissertation.
- Luo, Li. “A Symbolic Reading of Wide Sargasso Sea.” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 9, pp. 1221–9.
- Neimanis, Astrida. “Feminist Subjectivity, Watered.” *Feminist Review*, no. 103, 2013, pp. 23– 41.
- Pariat, Janice. “Dream of the Golden Mahseer.” *Boats on Land*, Penguin Random House, 2012, pp. 63–78.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women Madness and English Culture 1830–1980*. Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Singh, Rana P. B. “Water Symbolism and Sacred Landscape in Hinduism: A Study of Benares (Vārāṇasī).” *Erdkunde*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1994, pp. 210–27.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Responsibility.” *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1994, pp. 19–64.







**ashoka**  
UNIVERSITY

Young India  
Fellowship