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GNOSIS | An International Refereed Journal of English Language and Literature

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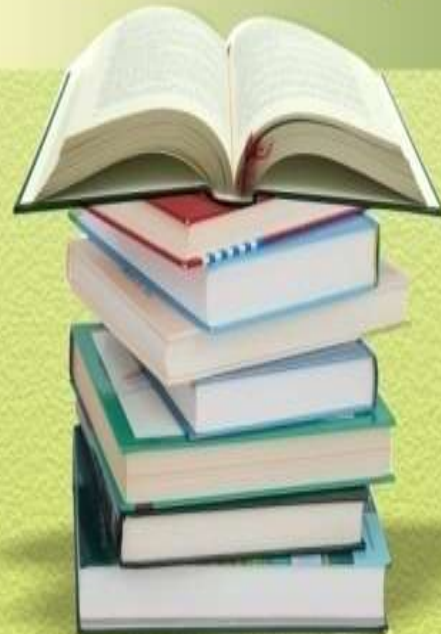
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Editorial

The April 2023 issue of GNOSIS had a very warm response from the readers in India and abroad that articles have been flowing in quick succession to fill the folder or this issue even before the deadline of 20 March 2023. The thumping reception of the journal shows the depth of multicultural issues in literature to which critics and readers are attracted. As a journal committed to quality research and writing, we are aware of the need to delink quality from publication cost. Hence, our decision is to charge no publication fee from the scholars whose papers will be published in the issues of GNOSIS. At the same time since GNOSIS is a self-financed venture, co-operation and support in the form of subscriptions are solicited from the readers and admirers of English Literature and Language from all over the world.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the Academicians and well-wishers of GNOSIS who recommended GNOSIS for publication. This issue has six research/critical articles. Before concluding, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our esteemed members of the Board of Advisors and Review Editors for their selfless and tiresome efforts in assessing the articles very sincerely and giving their valuable remarks to bring out this issue in such a grand manner. I am also grateful to the revered contributors who have made this issue of the Journal a beautiful reality. Wishing all the readers a mental feast. Happy Reading!

Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Editor

In the Interstices: The Plight of Immigrant Women in the Select Novels of Christy Lefteri

Dr. Shanmuga Priya M.

Submitted 29/01/2023 Revised 09/02/2023 Accepted 29/02/2023, Published 22/04/2023

Abstract: This paper aims to study two of the Cypriot British novelist Christy Lefteri's works, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) and *Songbirds* (2021). *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* narrates the experiences of a young Syrian couple who escape the brutalities of the civil war in their country by migrating to England. *Songbirds*, on the other hand, recounts the story of a middle-aged Sri Lankan woman who immigrates to Cyprus as a housemaid to gain economic prosperity. This paper attempts to view these novels as a part of the canon of migration/refugee literature. It examines the ways in which these novels portray the experiences of migration, displacement and forcible exile. This paper in particular focuses on the experiences of the women in these novels in the process of such life-changing exoduses. It discusses how the women in these novels are more vulnerable than men during the various stages of migration and displacement. Further, the paper also analyses how the women characters exhibit hybridity, ambivalence and the feeling of nostalgia.

Keywords: Migration, refugee, hybridity, ambivalence.

Mass exodus, mobility, flux and fluidity are the characteristic experiences of millions of people around the world in the last couple of centuries. People in the post-second World War era have migrated in large numbers both internally and internationally, both voluntarily and forcibly for several reasons to adapt to the rapidly shifting scenarios. Besides transforming the face of the world entirely, such mobilizations and migrations have been life-changing for millions. For some, migration has been a journey towards dream fulfillment and betterment; while for many others, the dreamlands they have sought often turns into the land of nightmares. The journeys and the bitter experiences of the unfortunate ones highlight the glaring realities of migration and displacement, pushing to the forefront countless human rights and humanitarian

issues. Often migrants are caught between Scylla and Charybdis and are not able to choose one over the other as both are equally dreadful. The literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries presents a vivid picture of such migrant experiences in various forms. The British writer Christy Lefteri, the daughter of Cypriot refugees, accurately captures such experiences in her novels.

This paper critically analyses two of Christy Lefteri's recent novels *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) and *Songbirds* (2021). It attempts to discuss the specific issues faced by the women of these novels as migrants and refugees. It aims to analyse how their sense of self is shaped by their traumatic experiences of displacement and resettlement. Further, it examines how their ambiguous position in the new environment deprives them of political, civil and legal rights and citizenship paving the way for inhuman brutalities against them. It also explores how migration changes the social and gender roles of the women of these novels.

The Beekeeper of Aleppo is the story of a young Syrian couple, Afra and Nuri Ibrahim. Using the stream of consciousness narrative, Lefteri recounts the nightmarish experiences of Nuri and Afra as they make their way from the war-stricken ancient Syrian city of Aleppo to England. Both of them seek asylum from the British Government, but at the end they are still awaiting clearance. *Songbirds* is the story of a middle-aged Sri Lankan woman, Nisha Jayakody, working as a housemaid in Cyprus. Told from the alternative perspectives of Petra, Nisha's employer, and Yiannis, her Cypriot lover, the novel narrates the circumstances leading up to the sudden disappearance of Nisha and the discovery of her corpse in the Mitsero Lake. Lefteri, though not an immigrant herself, uses the experience of growing up in the shadows of her parents' unexpected displacement during the 1974 Cyprus war and their refugee status in Britain. She also draws from her own experiences of working as a volunteer in the refugee centres in Athens.

The famous Indian writer Salman Rushdie observes, "The distinguishing feature of our times is mass migration, mass displacement and globalised finances for industries" (qtd in Pourjafari and Vahidpour 680). Migration occurs for several reasons globally. For Robin Cohen, people migrate because they are

victims of war or conflicts or foreign invasion and occupation. Migration takes place in search of job opportunities and economic betterment or for colonial and imperial reasons or for commercial expansion. It occurs voluntarily or forcibly due to economic crisis, political conflicts or ecological calamities (Blackman). Those who migrate or are displaced by conflicts, war and foreign occupation are refugees, while those who migrate to seek economic opportunities are migrant workers. The amendment or Protocol to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967) defines 'refugee' as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". On the other hand, migrant worker, according to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990), is "a person, who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaging in a remunerative activity in a state of which he or she is not a national".

Numerous factors including gender shape the experiences of migration and displacement -their intentions, processes and consequences. Though both men and women face hardships during migration, women are more prone to the dangers and perils of the journey, both during the transitory and the resettlement stages. Some even point out that gender relations and norms determine who migrates and affect the ability to access the opportunities to migrate (Gallien 723; Boyd and Grieco). In the mid-twentieth century, the figure of a migrant was gendered male. Women were regarded and depicted as passive players, who migrated with men as their wives, mothers or children. Today, however, majority of women migrate independently, single and alone as workers/labourers. They have gradually evolved as the greatest force to reckon with in the global labour market and their workforce participation is invaluable. Despite this, women, half of the global migrant population of around 135 million, frequently encounter hostile conditions. They are more vulnerable and face higher levels of discrimination than men. As most of them settle down in jobs in the invisible unorganised sectors like housework, nursing, child care and other service industries, they are exploited and subjected to ill-treatment, violence, misinformation, human

trafficking, extortion and abuse. They face “double” discrimination, both as women and as migrants or foreigners (Boyd and Grieco; “Gender”; “Female Migrant”). The status of women refugees is far more worse than the migrant female labourers. Besides, migration is a transformative factor which drastically changes women’s lives, their power, emotional and symbolic relations in society and culture, gender roles and norms. Such an impact has made migration studies scholars view gender as an integral part of immigrant experience today (Nawyn 751).

Today, literature faithfully reflects and represents the experiences of migration and displacement of millions around the world and such a literature known by the nomenclature ‘migrant’ literature in the literary circles is critically acclaimed and widely read. Hybrid selfhood, ambivalence, adapting to the new environment, alienation, nostalgia and a yearning to return to the homeland are some of the characteristic features of migrant literature (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 680). Added to its focus on privileged forms of migration, literature today also represents the plight of refugees and exiles. Such a literature is called ‘refugee’ literature and besides sharing most of the themes of migrant literature, it deals with the sense of uprootedness and the trauma of being forcibly expelled from the homeland. It is regarded as an interventionist or resistance discourse as it highlights facts which are frequently inconspicuous in the mainstream society and media (Gallien 721-26). This paper analyses the experiences of both female refugees and migrant labourers as portrayed in Lefteri’s *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* and *Songbirds*.

The hardships women suffer during the various stages of migration are beyond description. Minica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco distinguish three stages of migration, namely, the pre-migration stage, transit across state boundaries and post-migration stage. At each stage, women’s vicissitudes are countless as they are more vulnerable to macro and micro-level changes in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres globally and in their countries. The women of the novels selected here for study are apt illustrations of such a state of affairs.

Afra Ibrahim in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is one of those innumerable female victims of the Syrian

Civil war. The Syrian Civil War had begun in the spring of 2011 and is still raging today, even after twelve long years. Several thousand innocent women and children have been brutally abused and killed in this mindless internal strife. Many Syrians have become disabled as they have been mutilated or have lost their eyesight or the ability to hear. This strife has transformed the ancient historical cities of Syria into an uninhabitable everlasting inferno, which has resulted in the displacement of 6.8 million people. It is the largest number of refugees in the world according to the UN report (“Syrian Civil”; “Syrian Refugee”). Afra Ibrahim in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* was an award-winning landscape artist before the war, drawing customers across Europe, America and Asia. She had had a life wanting of nothing with a perfect family of a beekeeping husband Nuri Ibrahim and a seven-year-old son Sami. She had been a strong, practical woman with a penetrating wisdom of the world around her. Her husband and the narrator of the novel remarks, “Afra’s soul was as wide as the fields and the desert and the sky and the sea and the river she painted, and as mysterious. There was always more to know, to understand ...” (22). But the loss of her eyesight at the tragic death of her only son Sami, by an explosion from an air raid brings her world crashing down. Despite this, she refuses to leave the country, as she does not wish to leave Sami alone in his grave in her garden. Only when the situation worsens with mindless killings of innocent civilians, frequent air raids and the atrocities of the military and the radical militant forces, she agrees to depart with her husband. The threat to her husband’s life, the only beloved person alive to whom she desperately clings on to in her blindness, draws her out of her apathy. Her decision to move is born in the wink of an eye after the unexpected midnight militant raid of her house in search of her husband, who had made a false promise of joining them after taking care of his dying wife. The novel also presents women from other countries, most often from the Middle-East and Africa, like Farida from Afghanistan and Angeliki from Somalia, victims of political and ecological catastrophes, taking on the perilous journey as refugees to seek asylum in some strange unknown land.

Unlike the women of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* who are compelled to leave their homelands, Nisha Jayakody in *Songbirds* leaves Sri Lanka voluntarily as a labourer. However, she too is a victim of the

economic crisis caused by the civil war in her country. Nisha and her husband Mahesh had worked hard in the gem fields of Rathnapura, he in the mine shafts and she in the cleaning of the gems. They had made both ends meet and had even saved a meager amount in the name of educational funds for their daughter Kumari's prospective university education. But the untimely demise of Mahesh in the mine field accident shifts the entire weight of the family on to Nisha's shoulders and makes her the sole breadwinner. Unable to take care of her infant girl alone, the helpless and unprepared Nisha has no choice left but to quit her job and return to Galle to live with her aging mother. The only job she gets after weeks of walking, crying and begging people for an opportunity on the streets of the city, is as an assistant in a kottu shop in the Galle Green Urban Park. She hardly gets any income even after working strenuously late into the night for several hours making and selling kottu. As her mother's pension is not sufficient to meet the bills, they gradually begin to eat into Kumari's educational funds. Poverty threatens to swallow them up. So when Nisha learns of the dessert seller Isuri's departure to Europe seeking better employment, she decides to follow her footsteps in order to secure a better life and education for Kumari.

The transit period is more alarming for Afra than Nisha as both she and Nuri are smuggled across national borders. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* describes the perilous crossing at the Asi river in Armanaz to reach the Turkish border. Refugees cross the river at the dead of night in shallow sauce pans tied to long cables pulled by men on the other side. After crossing the river on the banks of which Ali, their smuggler, drops them at dawn, Afra and Nuri enter Turkey crawling through a hole in the border fence. The people in the border villages offer them water, bread, cherries, bags of nuts and blankets. The over-crowded camp for Syrian refugees is located in the open fields. The refugees live under the trees literally exposed to the elements. When Afra and Nuri reach Istanbul with the help of a fellow refugee, they are smuggled across the Mediterranean to Greece in a flimsy rubber boat. They escape from becoming headlines as boat accidents and migrant casualties are common in these parts of the world. On reaching Parmakonisi, Afra and Nuri camp on the shores and are ferried in a cramped ship to the island of Leeros where they get themselves registered as refugees. On this island, they are put up in a gated camp guarded by Greek

soldiers. The camp has rows and rows of similar-looking tiny cabins made of tin roofs and cardboard walls. Often these cabins are divided further and are shared by two families. They have to queue up early at the aid centre to get a morsel of the rationed food.

At Athens, Afra and Nuri are taken to the refugee camp in a school by the aid worker Neil. It is the camp to which families with children are usually brought and so when Neil realizes that their son is missing, he relocates them to Pedion Tou Areos, a notorious camp on the verge of the woods near the Macedonian border. They spend days together under a tree in fear of human traffickers and drug sellers. As this camp lacks sanitation facility, Nuri takes Afra to the Hope centre in Victoria Square everyday for a wash. Though sanitation is a common problem, women refugees suffer more and face dangers, specifically during menstruation. Finally, through Baram, a refugee from Kurdistan, Nuri and Afra get in touch with Constantinos Fotakis, a member of a smuggling network. Fotakis demands five thousand Euros for smuggling both of them into England as it is the hardest place for asylum-seekers to reach. Nuri's hard-earned savings falls two thousand Euros short of the demanded amount. So he is forced to smuggle drugs across Greece in the night for three weeks, leaving behind Afra as hostage in Fotakis's apartments. When Nuri completes his task successfully, Fotakis smuggles the couple to England through Madrid by availing fake Italian passports.

Even though many of the ordeals of the perilous journey from Syria to England are common to both Afra and Nuri, the hardships that Afra face as a woman are unique at times. She has become more vulnerable after losing her eyesight. As a blind woman refugee, she is triply discriminated and her position is much worse than the other women refugees. Entirely dependent on her husband, she is unable to notice the dangers around her. However, she could sense, with a sharp insight and perception, the perils in the air and people's motives. After leaving Aleppo, she spends months together in the open air exposed to the elements, except for short intervals in smugglers' flats. Most often those open air camps lack proper sanitation facilities which prove to be disadvantageous to her as a woman. Nuri often feels that her

blindness is a blessing in disguise as it would save her much pain from noticing the squalor around them. But her blindness makes her helpless at Fotakis's flats as she suffers the ignominy of being raped by him. As she has a premonition of some nasty trick from the beginning, she insists that Nuri should lock her up in their room and carry the key with him. But his negligence before his final assignment results in her humiliation. She feels let down by Nuri and flinches at his touch. Nuri remarks that Afra became more frozen than before. According to the UN report, one in five women or girl refugees suffer sexual harassment (Espin). Afra is ill-fated to be one among them.

Another unforgettable character in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, the Somalian refugee Angeliki is pregnant when she leaves her country because of poverty. As the Kenyan refugee camp in which she has stayed for a few months is closed down due to Al-Shabaab fighters, she undertakes the risky journey to Greece. Human traffickers rob the girl child she has on this journey by drugging her. She keeps complaining that her blood has been poisoned and constantly sips water to reduce its effect. Her white top is often wet and stained as her breasts continue to leak. On the other hand, the Afghani infant Mahsa's mother's breasts have gone dry because of the trauma of her journey and lack of food. There are other women and girls in the novel with burn marks, fractured legs and arms and broken minds.

Nisha in *Songbirds*, unlike Afra and Angeliki, has a less traumatic transit to Nicosia in Cyprus. She contacts an agency which could find her a position in another country and after going through several options for a year, she is placed as a housemaid at Petra's. Her agency charges an astronomical ten thousand Euros for securing this job, which leaves her with an enormous debt even after ten years of regular payment. Nisha is a legal immigrant, while numerous other maids and workers have migrated illegally.

When women reach their destination after overcoming numerous obstacles, they face more challenges than their male counterparts in getting assimilated into the host country. Since *The Beekeeper of Aleppo's* focus is on Afra's escape from the war-torn Syria and journey to England, it does not pay much attention

to her plight there. As asylum-seekers, Afra and Nuri are put up in B & B, a boarding house for migrants like them. The fellow boarders are sensitive and cordial towards her. However, she is denied medical care at first, as the letter from the migration office lacks her residential address. Nuri requests the GP to consider the case as an emergency, as Afra feels a constant sharp pain behind her eyes, but his appeal is of no avail. This illustrates how migrant women lack medical care in spite of the UN's advice not to discriminate against them. At Pedion Tou Areos too, only women volunteers who are trained to give medical aid are available when an emergency arises. Angeliki's arms are covered with open wounds, but it is not sure if she received any medical aid. There is a single common toilet at B & B, a welcome improvement to the open camps for Afra.

Nisha in *Songbirds*, on the other hand, is portrayed as a well-known but invisible member of her neighbourhood. Even her employer Petra, for whom she has worked for ten years, bringing up her child Aliko from the moment of her birth, knows her only as a maid and is in the dark about Nisha's private life. She has not understood her aches and hopes, her relationship with her own daughter, her dreams for her, how she maintained her relationship with her, her relationship with Aliko and all about her past. In fact, she is only one of the several hundred migrant housemaids and workers whose invisible hands run the Cypriot social machinery smoothly. Petra realises that she had failed to notice them and the chores they do until Nisha's sudden disappearance. They are usually hired as housemaids, but end up doing all the menial, child rearing and pet caring jobs. To put it simply, each one of them have a story. The Vietnamese Chau and Bian incessantly work late into the night from 6 in the morning at Theo's restaurant and house. The job routine of the Nepalese Binsa, once a radio jockey, and Soneeya, a nursery nurse, includes cleaning up dog shit and putting up with the cruelty of Mrs. Causta. Nilmini, a twenty-something Sri Lankan, works endlessly at Yiakoumi's Antique shop. Devna at the Blue Tigers has come to Cyprus seeking better employment to support her ailing family back home. She aptly observes that the women migrant workers in Cyprus are only treated as "children" or worse than "animals" (210). Restrained by the unwritten conventions and rules of their employers, these workers lead their lives as the shadows of the Cypriot

society. As Nisha points out, maids who form romantic relationships or become pregnant automatically lose their jobs. She observes that no one wants a maid with a baby. That is why the discovery of her pregnancy and her subsequent inability to terminate it terrifies her as it would push her to the brink of joblessness. She tells Yiannis about her daughter and mother, “It’s because of the work I do here that they have money to eat and live and go about their everyday lives. What would happen if I lost this job?” (124). Mary, one of the maids from Philippines, lost her job when her employer caught her jumping over the fence in the dark to meet her boyfriend. As she could not find any more jobs or proper accommodation, she decided to “sell her body” to stay comfortably in a bungalow with three other women and an old man (130). It is clear that the employers expect their maids to remain detached and aloof.

Besides enduring such inhumane treatment and expectations, the maids also face sexual exploitation and harassment and Lefteri interweaves such stories into Nisha’s grand narrative. Diwata is brutally beaten by her employer and given so little to eat that she becomes as thin as a twelve year old. But the new employer her agency placed her with is really magnanimous to get her a new car and new clothes and give her his credit card. Nisha asks Yiannis, “Why do you think that is?” (130). There are many other migrant women in the novel who have been forced into sex work. According to reports, Cyprus is the destination for human trafficking. Louisa Borg Haviara notes that immigrants are more vulnerable to trafficking and more than 70% of the victims are women. The complicated political circumstance in the region leads to the smuggling of many of them across the United Nations buffer zone or the green line. They are forced into begging and sex work. In the novel, the sixty-one-year-old Filipino woman Diwata Casi becomes a sex worker after she had left her employer who had rationed her water and food, which was less than a cat’s consumption. Mutya Santos, once a midwife in Manila, is fired from work when her employer discovers the complaint she has registered with her agency concerning his sexually abusive ways with her. Left without an option, she turns to sex work. Unable to find the right job in Kuwait, the Sri Lankan Ayomi Pathirana moves to Cyprus, but there too she gets only sex work. Since it is impossible to return home without paying the debts to her agency, she resigns herself to it. The Nepali Itisha, who is promised a

handsome job if she relocates as a student, only ends up at Maria's, the brothel bar (178-79).

The law of the land does not offer any protection to such victims, in spite of UN's insistence to provide immigrants equal access to the legal system of the country. Even legal immigrants like Nisha exist outside the Cypriot justice system. On her disappearance, both Petra and Yiannis attempt to lodge a police complaint, but cop Kyprianou refuses to register it saying, "These women are animals" and they follow either their instinct or money (78-79). The police react in the same way to the disappearance of Rosamie Cotabu and Reyna Gatan from Philippines. Without police and legal aid, Petra and Yiannis begin to investigate the disappearance of Nisha. The migrant women rise up in rebellion when the bodies of five immigrant women workers and their daughters including Nisha's are discovered in the Mitsero Lake after the arrest of a Cypriot psychopath. They demand to be treated on par with Cypriot citizens and to put an end to misogyny, xenophobia and violence against them.

Many of Lefteri's characters exhibit hybridity, ambivalence and a yearning to return to their homelands. Frequently, the characters in migrant or refugee literature inhabit a space "in-between" or "third space" and attempt to construct hybrid identities by combining the cultures of both the home and the new land. Such identities are transnational or transcultural, which are characterized by fluidity, multiplicity and borderlessness (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 686-87). Nisha in *Songbirds* is a good example of such an identity as she lives virtually in two worlds, mothering two children living in entirely different worlds - different time zones and cultures. One is her own daughter Kumari living in Sri Lanka with her mother and the other is Alikı in Nicosia, her employer's daughter. Like Menaka Nishanthe Ramanayaka, one of the housemaids at Lefteri's relations in Cyprus, on whom Nisha is modeled, she mothers Kumari over the phone. Lefteri calls this "virtual mothering" ("Acknowledgements"). Nisha contacts Kumari on Yiannis's tablet early Sunday mornings while in his flat. She remarks that that is when she feels relieved of the demands of nannying Alikı and remembers who she really is. She tells Kumari stories and both of them even read *The Secret Garden* over the phone. At the same time, she has built a beautiful relationship with

Aliki and in fact, she has replaced Petra in Aliki's affection. She has taken charge of her from her birth as Petra had fallen into depression after her husband's unexpected premature death. Aliki observes that Nisha is the one who put stars into her heart. In spite of Nisha's continued efforts to bring the mother and daughter together, they do not practically speak to each other. However, her wish is fulfilled only at her disappearance. Besides, the dress Nisha wears, the food she cooks, the stories she tells resonate with both cultures. She tells Aliki stories from the *Mahadennamutta and His Pupils*. She explains to Yiannis the triyak, the six realms of birth in Buddhism. Though she is a Buddhist, she visits a church in Nicosia and likes to light candles at the altar.

Nisha's position both in Petra's household and Cyprus is ambivalent. Despite having her legal papers, she is discriminated against by the legal system of the country. She is hired only as a domestic work, but ends up as Aliki's nanny and later her stand-in mother. She had loved her dead husband Mahesh dearly, but now she has fallen for Yiannis, the poacher. Despite conceiving Yiannis's child, she rejects his engagement ring citing her love for her late husband. Her confused emotional state prevents her from responding to him immediately. With great effort, she attempts to combine the two worlds she lives in. For a few months since her arrival in Nicosia, she had been constantly haunted by the memories of Kumari and her country. But later she herself observes that for her the two worlds are separate but harmonious. In her attempts to combine them, she creates a third space, an interstices which leaves her in a limbo. In spite of becoming an inevitable part of Petra's household over the years, she often yearns to return to Sri Lanka and to Kumari, whom she left behind as an infant. However, she could accomplish this only after repaying her outstanding debts to her agency, saving enough to ensure a bright future for Kumari and freeing Yiannis from the network of poachers.

Afra in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is forced to fake her identity as an Italian to enter England. But the novel does not describe how she shapes her identity in England. As an asylum-seeker, her position is ambiguous and fragile. She attempts to get along with the routine of B & B and its inmates. Often

nostalgic about her life in Syria, she longs to return to it soon. Despite her blindness, she expresses this yearning through her paintings. Her paintings depict her dream of a country not torn by war and bloodshed. Her future in England is uncertain as she is awaiting the government's decision to grant her asylum at the end, but she is gradually regaining her eyesight.

Both *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* and *Songbirds* discuss the burning issues of displacement and migration from various angles. They specifically portray the traumatic experiences of women under such circumstances. Homelessness and unsafe environments render them vulnerable and place their lives at the brink of precarity. Feelings of uncertainty, alienation, nostalgia and a yearning for the old life crowd their lives as they live at the interstices of nations, societies and cultures with very little sense of belonging. Such a sense of lack of belonging and being nowhere cost their dignity and lives. Christy Lefteri proves to be adept in depicting such issues movingly with her first-hand knowledge of refugees and migrants and her well-researched writing.

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An Existential Analysis of Girish Karnad's *Yayati* through the Lens of Man-perfect Concept from the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract: The concept of Man-perfect in the *Mahabharata* has a seminal importance and nowhere in the epic, this ideal is followed with honesty. This inherent irony of the epic is being exploited by Girish Karnad. His much-discussed debut play *Yayati* (1961) lays bare the contradictions in the central character of king Yayati who sacrifices his son's youth for the pleasures of his own flesh. Completely deviating from the norm, Yayati expounds that when the male becomes the norm breaker he should not be afraid of any blame to come on his shoulder. Karnad owes much to the epic to speak to the contemporary audience. But, it is also very clear from the reading of his play that it also redefines the *Mahabharata* narratives for his individual purposes. The present paper reads Karnad's *Yayati* in the light of Existential philosophy. It also illustrates how the idea of the "man-perfect" is to be understood and interpreted in relation to the Mahabharata and contemporary Indian plays.

Keywords: The *Mahabharata*, *Yayati*, Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself, Bad faith, Angst.

The *Mahabharata* revolves around the happenings of the Kuru dynasty which culminates in the conflict between two families of cousins named the Kauravas and the Pandavas. With the help of complex narrative and flashback techniques, the famous sage, Vaisampayana unfolds the glories of the illustrious kings and royal personages of the Kuru dynasty, such as Yayati, Dushmanta, Bharata, Nahusha, Santanu, Bhishma, Dhritarastra, Kaurava brothers and Pandava brothers in King Janmejaya's Sarpasatra Yajna (sacrifice). Though adhering to its hyperbolic nature, the *Mahabharata* honours its principal characters with the designation of Rajarshi (Benevolent king), yet the characters' behavioral patterns often divert from prescribed ideal duties for the man-perfect of the *Santi* and the *Anusasana Parvas*. Thus, in the *Mahabharata*, a dichotomy between the prescribed duties of the man-perfect and their applied counterpart is observed. Ultimately, the dichotomy ends up in irony where a contrast is noticed between the prescribed and applied part of the concept of man-perfect. To locate this irony, King Yayati's character can be discussed in the light of the *Mahabharata*'s idea of man-perfect.

In the epic, Yayati's character does not stick to the prescribed duties of man-perfect, both from social and metaphysical levels. In his activity, Yayati avoids social norms and often practices against them. Amongst

the nine general duties of a man prescribed in the *Santi Parva*, Yayati shuns the first six, such as, “suppression of wrath”, “truthfulness of speech”, “justice”, “forgiveness” and “begetting children upon one’s own wedded wife”. He begets children from Sharmishtha, but she is not his wedded wife. Yayati hides the truth about his relationship with Sharmishtha from his queen, Devayani. After being cursed, Yayati is not able to do justice to his fatherhood. Forgetting the father’s duty to his children, King Yayati tries to snatch his sons’ youth to satiate his libidinal quest and brutally curses back his four unwilling sons. Designated with the title of “Rajarshi”, in the *Mahabharata*, Yayati’s attitude fails him to be the practitioner of Sattwika Guna and projects him too trivial to embrace Lord Krishna’s iconoclastic view of Gunatita/Nirguna man. With his strongest inclination towards libidinal satisfaction, King Yayati becomes more associated with the Rajasik and Tamasik Gunas. In the *Adi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, while narrating the story of Yayati to King Janmejaya, Vaisampayana emphasizes the incident where Yayati appeals to his sons for swapping their youth with his old age with an excuse of his over inclination towards young women. According to Vaisampayana: “And attacked by decrepitude, the monarch then spoke, O Bharata, unto his sons Yadu and Puru and Turvasu and Drahyu and Anu these words, ‘Ye dear sons, I wish to be a young man and to gratify my appetites in the company of young women. Do you help me therein?’” (Ganguli 1:165).

Girish Karnad’s *Yayati* (1961) dramatizes the *Mahabharata*’s narrative regarding King Yayati. The play does not confine itself to the traditional structures of the age-old epic; rather it incorporates contemporary appeal in its theme and structure. To contemporize the prominent storyline of the *Mahabharata*, the play often alters the incidents and characters present in the original narrative. The play transforms Pooru¹, the younger son of Yayati and Sharmishtha into the only offspring of the King from his first queen who was basically a demon in disguise. The play also includes the scene of a physical union between Yayati and Sharmishtha at the time of Pooru’s arrival at the palace with his newly married wife. The inclusion of the character of Chitrlekha, the newly wedded wife of Pooru and her hasty suicide as a consequence of her husband’s acceptance of his father’s decrepitude add a modern flavour to the play. In the epic, after indulging in sensual pleasure for thousand years, Yayati abandons it and owns Vanaprastha Ashrama; but, the play depicts that the series of mishaps, culminating in the suicide of Chitrlekha, degenerate Yayati’s sensual attitude and reminds him the duty of a father. At the end of the play, Yayati returns the youth to Pooru and accepts the decrepitude.

The entire play revolves around the character of Yayati. Throughout the play, the main protagonist, Yayati who is termed “Rajarshi” in the epic, is portrayed as the symbol of indecisiveness, lechery, and sensuousness. This deconstructive delineation of the celebrated epic character demonstrates the inherent

conflict between an idea and its implication in the *Mahabharata*. In the epic, the character of Yayati has been seen to negate the responsibility of his irresolute actions and simultaneously charge the third party for his own transgression. The play, however, pinpoints its principal protagonist's unique attitude to avoid the consequences of his contravention and condemns his character by painting his shortcomings. An intricate analysis of the play signifies the influence of the "Concept of Freedom and Responsibility" of the "Existential Philosophy" upon it. Acknowledging the impact of the "Existential Philosophy" in the play, the playwright asserts:

I was excited by the story of Yayati, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the Existentialists. This consistent harping on responsibility which the Existentialist indulge in suddenly seemed to link up with the story of Yayati. ("Girish Karnad Interviewed" Enact No-54)

If the character of Yayati is defined in the light of Jean-Paul Sartre's Concept of Freedom and Responsibility as described in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, then it becomes clear that Yayati tries to shun the responsibility of his wrongdoings which he freely chooses to perform. This very attitude of Yayati stands in the extreme opposite of Sartre's Concept of Freedom and Responsibility. In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, while illustrating his view about freedom and responsibility, Sartre delivers that human beings have free will and they can choose anything for their survival. Going against the popular idea of his time, "Determinism" which delineates that anybody's future actions depend on his/her past experiences, Sartre states that human beings are not constrained by past choices and they are free to do as they wish because there is always an infinite number of choices anybody can make at any time. At the time of expressing his idea about freedom and responsibility, Sartre also coins the term, "facticity" indicating some specific thing in man's life that cannot be changed or influenced; such as the birthplace, household surroundings, parents etc. But, Sartre believes that man can change his/her attitude toward these facticities also. He rejects the idea that man's genetics and upbringing shape him/her. With his concept of freedom in human life, Sartre also gives his concept of responsibility. His views on the idea of moral responsibility are that human being basically does not want to be independent, responsible being because responsibility also brings a special stress called "angst". He argues that everyone must bear the responsibility for his/her own deed. In the words of Sartre: "...man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (707). According to Sartre, the concept of freedom is generated from consciousness in the human mind. He also defines two types of reality that construct man's conscious experience: "the being of the object of

consciousness” and that of “consciousness” itself. “The being of the object of consciousness” or “Being-in-itself” stands for anything that lacks self-consciousness. On the other hand, “consciousness” always stands as the consciousness “of something” and it is impossible to hold it within a conscious experience; it exists as “Being-for-itself”. By the term “Being-for-itself”, Sartre indicates any being who is capable of self-consciousness. The main feature of the “Being-for-itself” (humans) is the ability to project themselves in the future or to reassess their past. “Being-in-itself” also projects its negative power, by which man can experience “nothingness”.

From the very first scene of the play, *Yayati*, the principal character, Yayati is categorized as “Being-in-itself”, devoid of self-consciousness. In First Act, the dialogues between Devayani and Sharmishtha reveal the primary aim of Yayati’s marriage to Devayani. Sharmistha opines that the real aim of this Asavarna (inter-caste) marriage is not the King’s selfless love for Devayani; rather, the King deliberately indulges in the relationship with Devayani, the daughter of Sukracharya, just to achieve immortality using his father-in-law’s Sanjeevani Mantra. To Sharmishtha, Yayati admits that to him the concept of death always signifies anybody’s death. And he does not think that in the future also, he would be gripped by death. He tells Sharmistha: “The only death real to me is that of someone else. Not mine. I never think of my own death. That is not for me a possibility at all” (24).

The play can also be treated as the projection of its major protagonist’s lustful, hedonistic concern towards life. At the beginning of Act Two, Yayati demonstrates his life’s objective to Sharmishtha which has no space for spiritual or metaphysical ideology; rather, the objective includes seeking pleasure from women’s bodies, singing, and dancing. In his priority list, the concern for his subject is placed at the lowest level. In the 56th section of the *Santi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma says that the rulers should think for the benefit of their subjects like the “would-be mother” who constantly feels about her baby in the womb. But, in the play, Yayati does not adhere to Bhishma’s theory. His priority list includes women, music, dance, and celebration as his first preference. Yayati informs Sharmishtha: “Woman, music, dance, celebrations, my subjects. I love life. I love my subjects. I like those around me to be happy and cheerful. I would like you to remember that” (*Yayati* 24). These words explicitly reveal the character of Yayati. His ignorance about the duties of a Kshatriya as well as a ruler and indulgence in hedonistic pleasure exposes the lack of self-consciousness in his character.

Yayati’s love relation with Sharmishtha and its effect act as the pivot of the play. Sharmishtha, the daughter of Danava king, Vrishaparvan has become the slave of Devayani as a result of their pre-marital quarrel and follows Devayani in the palace of Yayati. Instead of knowing the fact of these two women’s rivalry and jealousy, Yayati willingly faces Sharmishtha in the nuptial room decorated for Pooru and

Chitrlekha and indulges in a physical relationship with her. Yayati's inclination toward Sharmishtha infuriates his queen Devayani. As a result, she abandons the King and goes away to her father Sukracharya. Observing Devayani's situation the enraged Sukracharya curses Yayati with decrepitude. In this situation also, the behaviour of the cursed Yayati does not suit his stature. Instead of accepting the curse as the consequence of his transgression, the King tries to shun his responsibility by accusing other people of his misfortune. Ignoring the duties of the king and the father to his subjects and sons respectively Yayati ironically seeks refuge from them with a plea for accepting his curse. In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre terms this type of human state as "bad faith". He defines "bad faith" as a special kind of self-deception that involves denying anybody's own freedom. According to Sartre, human beings always try to escape the freedom that they do not want to bear, and one specific mechanism to avoid this responsibility is something called "bad faith". By elucidating the example of the café waiter, Sartre points out that one solution to avoid freedom is to slip into a social role, like a café waiter, and through this one can convert him/herself just as a thing or object (Being-in-itself).

In the play, the characteristics of "bad faith" can be stressed in the character of the main protagonist, Yayati. From the beginning of the drama, the character of Yayati suffers from a deficiency of self-consciousness. After being cursed by Sukracharya, Yayati negates his true self and owns the "Being-in-itself" state. After receiving the curse of untimely old age, Yayati's state of "Being-in-itself" prevents him to accept it with calmness; rather at this very time also he wishes to stick to his previous lifestyle without considering the idea of freedom and responsibility. Rejecting Sharmishtha's idea to accept the curse in isolation, the king wishes to repeat his past deeds:

Solitude? What are you talking about? I don't want solitude. I can't bear it. I want people around me. Queens, ministers, armies, enemies, the populace. I love them all. Solitude? The very thought is repulsive. If I have to know myself, Sharmishtha, I have to be young. I must have my youth. (*Yayati* 43)

Yayati not only confines himself to "bad faith", but also, avoiding his own responsibility, thrusts it onto his son and subjects. He has no courage to face Sukracharya. But, when Sharmishtha sends Pooru to Sukracharya to find a way out, Yayati does not stop him; rather he eagerly waits for Pooru who is supposed to come up with a solution. The ending part of Act Two projects jealousy of Yayati for his young son, Pooru. When Yayati comes to know that on his way from Sukracharya's place, Pooru becomes busy in a discussion with the minister, he (Yayati) gets infuriated and suspects that his son has no loyalty for him. He orders: "Here I am on a bed of burning coals and he hangs around confabulating. Ask him to come in. Immediately. Tell him I order him to come" (*Yayati* 44). In Act Four, after the abandonment of

Pooru, burdened with his father's decrepitude, by his newly wedded wife, Chitrlekha, Yayati asks her to own Pooru. In this scene, the dialogues between Yayati and Chitrlekha also portray the features of "bad faith" in the character of Yayati. During their conversation, Chitrlekha enquires from Yayati about his duties as a father. She asks: "What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?" (62). Yayati has no definite answer to it. By explaining his duties towards his subject, Yayati escapes the query of Chitrlekha. Here he informs that his duty toward his subjects becomes an impediment for him to follow his duty as a father. But, the important point is that in Act Two, Yayati confesses to Sharmishtha about his priorities which place his subjects at the lowest level. The priorities list women, music, dance, and celebration as the primary aim of Yayati's life. So, it is apparent that to evade his responsibility towards his son, Pooru, Yayati deliberately emphasizes his duty towards his subjects which reflects his self-deceptive nature as well.

In the play, the character of Pooru contrasts with the character of his father, Yayati. Pooru is an ideal representative of the "Being-for-itself" state. With his self-consciousness, he can estimate himself correctly. In Act Two, at the time of conversation with his father Yayati, he informs him (Yayati) that without seeking the answer, he questions himself which can be treated as the base of his self-consciousness. Pooru says, "I just want to go somewhere where I can sit quietly and ask myself questions. Just ask questions. Not seek answers. Ask questions of myself. I should be quite content if I found the right question. Just one" (*Yayati* 38). Like his father, Pooru does not evade responsibility with self-deception, instead he owns it. As a result, he also suffers from "angst" which exemplifies his willing acceptance of his father's decrepitude. In Act Three, the conversation between Yayati and Pooru reveals the "angst" in Pooru's character where he informs his father about the negating attitude of the subjects who do not want to accept Yayati's curse. Pooru tells his father: "Trust? Glory? Sacrifice? Who was there to discuss the big words with? They refused to talk to me. Or even to listen, as though mere listening would fetter them to some unknown commitment. They retreated even as I approach them. As if I was offering them plague" (48). At the time of receiving his father's decrepitude, Pooru's dialogue reflects the flavour of "angst" where he terms himself as a "worm". He describes himself: "A worm, aspiring to outdo the eagles" (49).

In the last section of the play, the principal protagonist, Yayati becomes self-conscious. Coming out of his "bad faith", he becomes aware of his freedom and responsibility. Yayati brings back his curse from his son Pooru and continues to bear his untimely old age. From the perspective of Existential Philosophy, a character can be altered from "bad faith" into self-consciousness. In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre terms "bad faith" as a "metastable stage". According to him, with the help of self-consciousness, one can leap from "bad faith" to "good faith". In Sartre's own words:

Even though the existence of bad faith is very precarious, and though it belongs to the kind of psychic structures which we might call metastable, it presents nonetheless an autonomous and durable form. It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can live in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life. (90)

Albert Camus also believes in the sudden emergence of self-consciousness in man's mind. According to him:

It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” – this is important. (19)

After becoming self-conscious, Yayati realizes the purposelessness of his youth which he has earlier snatched from his son, Pooru, and becomes aware of his duty to his son. He says:

I thought there were two options – life and death. No, it is living and dying we have to choose between. And you have shown me that dying can go on for all eternity. Suddenly I see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, turning rancid. You are lying on your pyre, child burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything. (*Yayati* 68)

He repeatedly requests his son, Pooru to give back his cursed old age and wants to bestow the youth to him (Pooru). He appeals: “Please help me, Pooru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning. Take back your youth, Pooru. Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds” (69). But, it can be said that Yayati's self-consciousness is not a sudden emergence, instead it is an after-effect of the suicide of dejected Chitrlekha who commits it due to her shattered dream regarding his newly married husband.

In Karnad's play, Yayati's predicament is most often discussed by critics in terms of Existentialism. It is not that he has never been a subject of the rules of a game set earlier by powerful males in a society like him. These rules also discriminate between males as they naturally make women play things, and most often relegate the women folk beyond the border of the domain of power. Pooru as a questioning voice and

Chitralkha as one that has been silenced, stand out in the middle as the representatives of the powerless in this game.

Notes:

1. In Karnad's play, *Yayati*, the spelling of the word "Puru" is "Pooru".

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Preeti Shenoy's 'Life is What You Make it': A Trajectory of 3d's - Desire, Despair and Despondency

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Abstract: On the canvas of modern Indian English writers, the name of Preeti Shenoy is undoubtedly ranked among the top five bestselling gutsy authors. She is one of the most acclaimed and distinguished celebrities in India. Her novels, quite distinct in themes, have been making good business due to their remarkably simple yet appealing style. Her characters resonate with those whom the readers encounter in their day to day activities. This compatibility enables them to swing and sway with the characters and relive their lives. Her novel 'Life is What You Make it' is well spun and rightly woven with a discrete theme- 'bipolar disorder'. Its setting is the India of 1990s, the era when the life was not so complicated and stressed as it is now. The protagonist of the novel is Ankita Sharma, a simple girl with not so high dreams, through whom the author has depicted the ebb and flow of life. Ankita is an immature young girl in her 20s who faces a plethora of ups and downs. This condition is mainly due to her infatuation. The sojourn of her mental trauma begins with the suicide of Abhishek as she feels herself responsible for it. The guilt conscious is so strong that she experiences mental breakdown and henceforth nothing remains for her as normal as it was earlier. The swing between illusion and reality is so swift that she herself is puzzled and everything goes berserk. The paper strives to peeps into the roller coaster life of the protagonist to not only purge out her fluctuating mental dilemma but also portray the contemptible trajectory of her life post suicide attempt. It also tends to highlight the fact that suicide cannot be a solution to any problem. The paper aims to fetch home the notion that with a strong grit and right medication any mental disorder can be cured. Ultimately, saving a life is what matters.

Keywords- Resonate, compatibility, spun, immature, sojourn, plethora, breakdown, dilemma.

Novel writing in English has not only undergone a sea change but has also taken a huge leap ever since the entrant of novice writers in the genre. With the advent of the neophyte the theme of the novel has also witnessed a huge change. Clinical Trauma, especially mental disorder is rampantly used as a dominant subject by the contemporary writers. There is a clutch of such writers who have created ripples into the calm ocean by their turbulent write-up providing new phase to the readers and challenging them with new topics that rip into the fabric of life. These stories, too close to the real life, directly question the readers by peering into their eyes. Preeti Shenoy, as stated earlier, is one of the most distinguished and renowned Indian English novelists ranked among the top five bestselling authors. She is a part of the select club of bestselling authors that includes Amish, Ravinder Singh and Durjoy Datta – those practitioners of the

extremely popular genre of pop-Indian fiction. These stories have many fans and the writers rule the bestseller charts. Her novel '*Life is What You Make It*' has proved a trend setter ranking her in the genre of Psycho-analytical writing. The setting of the novel is India of 20s. The story revolves around a young, immature and highly sensitive girl Ankita Sharma who is in her twenties. She is an aspiring female who desires to venture into the forbidden arenas of life to fathom veiled secrets. She is brimming with energy and desire to drink life to its fullest. In the course of her journey she encounters some men and befriends a few. She falls in love with three different men, Vaibhav, Abhishek and Joseph. Her mental trauma begins when Abhishek commits suicide. She holds herself responsible for his death as it was she who chooses education over marriage. Hence forth nothing remains same for her as her life takes a three hundred and sixty degree turn. The entire algorithm of her life, the arithmetic and the trigonometric, all collapsed like a fragile house of cards. Since now she had been living a blessed life of love and hate, wherein she was the guiding angel. After the revelation of her affair with Vaibhav and Abhishek the entire scenario changes, her parents get highly infuriated making the situation worst for her. Unable to cope up with the sudden change in her life she suffers from nervous breakdown and goes into the extremity of committing suicide.

The twist in the story begins when her parents indulge into her mental treatment shunting from one doctor to another. Finally, their journey ended when Dr. Madhusudan of '*National Mental Health Institute*' diagnosed that Ankita Sharma, the protagonist, was a patient of '*bipolar disorder*'. According to the NIMH, '*Bipolar affective disorder (BPAD), also known as manic-depressive illness, is a disorder that is characterized by symptoms which include mood disturbance (depression or elation) accompanied by related cognitive, psychomotor, behavioral or interpersonal difficulties. This causes significant impairment in the patient*' (Web). Bipolar Disorder is associated with unusual shifts in mood, activity levels, energy, concentration and the potential to carry out day-to-day activities. The treatments for Bipolar Disorder include a combination of therapies that include medication, ECT and psychotherapy.

Life is an uphill journey with many uncertainties. It has various twists and turns which makes the life difficult yet enchanting, like a sweet and sour dish. Life does have challenges and every individual has his or her share of it, some a few and a selected few have it in abundance. Ankita, it seems, is the chosen one to have it in heaps to her share. Psychologists have suggested different vehicles to reach a goal or to live life without giving up, such as determination, strong will etc., but nothing supersedes hope. It is hope which is the most important agency to approach problems and obstacles with a mindset and a strategy to achieve the set goal. In the words of Emily Dickinson,

*'Hope is a thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And sings the tune without the words-*

And never stops at all' (Lines 1-4)

In 1991, Charles R. Synder, a psychologist had come up with '*Hope Theory*' which stated that hope is a strong force which not only links one's past and present to the future but also sustains courage to move ahead with confidence, maintaining life's balance. It is a theory based on optimism and positivity. Today's youngsters are technically sound but they lack patience and are highly sensitive and emotional. They easily lose hope and give up without trial. Dejection has taken a front seat and hopelessness has permanently creped in leading to an emotion which rises due to low mood, isolation, lack of motivation and lack of interest in future. It occurs mainly among individuals who continually lead a dissatisfied and stressed life. This dissatisfaction settles into their lives due to damaged relationships and frequently broken friendships. When relations don't sustain long, the hope in life dips and one becomes morose and suicidal. The novel '*Life is What You Make it*' deals with a somewhat similar theme wherein the protagonist Ankita Sharma's life is messed up due to her relationship with three men which ultimately leads to destruction.

She is just 20 but falling in love is such an emotional hook-up that it surpasses everything- age, sex, religion, caste, creed- almost everything. Adolescent is a tender age and the youngsters find it difficult to grapple with the surge of high emotions that occur due to passion. Ankita is a carefree girl full of hope and aspiration. How and when does the hope converge into hopelessness and life becomes pessimistic, is all the narrative deals with. Preeti Shenoy has deftly balanced the sway of Ankita's life from hope to disillusionment. The reader feels carried away along with the story's momentum, feeling the hurt and hiatus Ankita experiences in her troublesome journey, from home to hospital.

Ankita is a jovial girl who is in love with Vaibhav and when he proposes her she feels '*ecstatic*' (p.13). From school she moves towards college life and joins St. Agnes College where she meets Abhishek who is a student of Mahaveer College and feels for him. The chemistry is so deep that they start meeting at every cultural event and thereby get closer. In the course of time, Ankita never forgets Vaibhav and always feels guilty about him as he was her first love and it was he who had not only introduced her to love but also given her life a different meaning. Though she feels guilty of cheating Vaibhav, she enjoys the company of Abhishek. She reveals, '*My inner voice squeaked again trying to remind me to tell him about Vaibhav. But somehow at that moment, Vaibhav and everything to do about him seemed so far away. I was having such a good time that I didn't want anything to spoil it*' (p.46). Ankita, somehow, musters courage and tries to steer out of the guilt by disclosing her past relation to Abhishek but he denies accepting it, calling it farce. His love for Ankita is so deep that he can't stand anyone else in her life and wants her to be his forever. He expresses his love to her through a letter written in blood wherein he writes '*I LOVE YOU*' in bold. He says, '*I wanted you to see how sincere I was and how desperate. Gosh, you have no idea how much I love you*' (p.47).

After completing her course, Ankita prefers doing MBA from Bombay. Abhishek tries to dissuade her and persuade for marriage but she is too adamant to give up. Unaware of the consequence, she moves to Bombay to pursue her dream. She says,

'How could I tell him that my dreams had grown beyond the town of Cochin? They had tasted life outside. They had seen a wider world out there. I wanted a slice of that. It was mine for the asking. I could not be tied down like this. I could not commit. I could not give him my word. Heck, I could not even tell him that I loved him' (p.76).

Abhishek, unable to bear the separation, gets depressed and commits suicide. It happens in a wink, sparing her no time to react. Though she poses to keep normal but this episode affects her strongly and uproots her from within. Consequently, she becomes hyperactive and abnormal, both physically and mentally. She gets rigorous in her early morning joggings and meticulous in her studies. Insomnia grips her, indicating the beginning of bipolar disorder. At this point of her life she is proposed by a guy named Joseph which she accepts despite the fact that she doesn't love him. Actually she is haunted by those few words spoken by Abhishek's grandfather, '*sneham mathram puchikaruthu*'- '*Never belittle love*' (p.79), he had advised her when she had called him after his suicide. The guilt conscious in her was becoming prominent with every minute that was ticking away. She was left dwindling between Vaibhav and Abhishek and was unable to surge out of the turbulent situation she was stuck in. Her condition becomes worse when her parents trace the love letters which she had secretly kept in her custody. They scold her for the affairs, her negligence towards her studies and burn the letters in front of her. The incident comes as a shock to her and hence forth; nothing remains normal.

Now, she is a changed person who loves to inflict pain on her. She is constantly haunted by the feeling of guilt and fear and is unable to go to her college. She loses interest in everything and prefers lying on her bed deeply sunk in reverie. She also loses her ability to read and comprehend a book and even tries to commit suicide. At this juncture her parents step in and, realizing the gravity of her illness, take her to various doctors for treatment. Initially it seemed a wild goose chase because nothing worked positively. Ultimately they take her to National Mental Health Institute at Bangalore where she is advised to get admitted. Ankita refuses to stay and gets too violent. She loses her self-control and is administered with a sedative. It is here that she is diagnosed with a mental ailment termed as '*Bipolar Disorder*'- a state of mind which is symptomized by dramatic mood shifts dwindling between dual phases namely the '*manic phase*' where in the afflicted is bursting with energy and high spirits followed by '*depressive phase*' which often culminates to suicidal tendencies. Ankita is immediately put on medication and is given ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy) to rein her negative impulses. Here Dr. Madhusudan plays a major role in

instilling hope in his patient. In the words of Ankita, *'He was offering me the last vestiges of hope and I was clinging to it with the desperation of a drowning person'* (p.164).

Dr. Madhusudan proved an angel for her as under his care and faith that he bestowed on her; she gained courage to survive the ordeal. Dr. Madhusudan facilitated her to regain her lost hope in order to lead a normal life. He truly cared for Ankita because his own sister had committed suicide and the family could not find a reason for her extreme step. Madhusudan was deeply shocked and it was then that he had decided to study psychiatry and help people prevent suicide attempt. He saw his sister's reflection in Ankita and suggested her to continue with her prospects even though she had dropped out of MBA. For the first time after her illness, Ankita is hopeful about her future. She expresses her happiness and safety in being there under the treatment of Dr. Madhusudan. Later she is shifted to the OT (Occupational Therapy) wing where there is a recreation room which impresses her. She says, *'OT wing seemed like a different world altogether. It did not have the feel of a hospital in the least bit'* (p.170). She is charmed and drawn towards the art materials and starts painting. Here she befriends Anuj and Sagar, who are also admitted in the hospital for treatment.

Dr. Madhusudan plays a pivotal role in her life. He proves a savior for her. During the psychotherapy sessions he motivates her by appreciating her writing skill and guiding her to work on it to make it more refined and perfect. He also encourages her bravery and courage to sustain life positively. He gives her his childhood books to read. Ankita faces great difficulty in reading and comprehending them. So, Dr. Namita Deshmukh reads it for her and she jots down every bit of it on the paper to retain them in her memory. By the end of the sixth week her condition improves and she no longer needs to write down the passages to remember them. She picks up a book and reads it in a single sitting. She is utterly delighted and pleased at her improvement. Now, her overweight due to illness and stagnated lifestyle is also reduced due to her regular physical exercise. When fully cured; she feels nostalgic in leaving the hospital. A mixed feeling of joy and sorrow enwraps her and she feels difficult to bid adieu. She gifts her paintings to Dr. Madhusudan, Dr. Namita, Anuj and Sagar.

Her father tries to convince her to continue with her studies and complete MBA, her most yearning ambition. But now her ideology towards life has completely changed. She drops the idea because she fosters a broader view of life and knows what she wants from it. She chooses to take up a creative writing course. In a letter to Vaibhav she writes in a highly philosophical tone about her opinion of life, *'I have realised that love and faith can indeed work miracles. I have realised that love and friendship do have a power'* (p. 201). She celebrates life and develops a firm feeling that the festivity would last longer. She regains her lost hope and attains positivity. She sets out to turn a new leaf in her life; forgetting her past and getting over her disorders. She strives to create an aura of her inner self and connect it with the

exterior, rather she successfully tries to overcome her sufferings and divulge her trauma into the brightness of her present life. Her philosophical self has acquired the power to see through the darkness of the past and guide her towards the brightness of future; which is awaiting her with an abated breath.

Life seems picturesque now. Preeti Shenoy has, with the perfect stroke of an artist's brush, painted the sufferings of Ankita's Bipolar Disorder so acutely that its impact is impeccable and unmatched. Ankita's scuffle through the disorder and her hope to kick start afresh is the hallmark of Preeti's novel '*Life is What You Make It*'. In an interview with Anupama Krishnakumar of Spark, Preeti explained about the choice of theme in the following words,

'Bipolar Disorder is slowly gaining awareness in India but continues to be treated as somewhat of a taboo topic in most households. The book is based on a true story and when I first heard the story, it moved me so much that I decided it had to be written and shared with the world' (Life Is What You Make It- An Interview...).

Today's life, post Covid Pandemic, lacks physical sustenance. The youngsters of today are brought up in an environment which is full of risks and threats; making them vulnerable and weak. Life is a roller coaster ride which gives us the glimpse of high as well as low, equally. In the times of distress, it is nothing but hope which proves the last straw to pull one out of the vortex. Shenoy's story teaches us to sustain hope in every phase of life. The author strongly puts forth that there is always a way out of the dark and dingy alley, suicide is in no way a solution to any problem. Disorder is a mental condition which can happen to anyone in this stressful life. It should not be mocked at but taken as a normal situation and dealt with clinically. Through the protagonist Ankita; the author has not only succeeded in conveying a positive note to the society but also nailed it right.

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Shillong as ‘Heterotopia’: Spatial Struggle and Literary Representation

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Abstract: Michel Foucault, in his 1967 lecture *Des Espaces Autres* (Of Other Spaces), extrapolates on “an epoch of space...of juxtaposition... near and far”(Foucault 1), a historical time in which space and spatiality are crux to understanding social changes and visceral existence in everyday life. How does cartography evolve as a powerful force determining lived experiences in the current epoch? Furthermore, Professor Tally elaborates on this proposition and brings a new discourse on representational spaces that are not physical or absolute but constructive, constructing narratives, history and cultural parameters. To gain a close perspective of this geocriticism which discusses methods in which a place may be studied as a social outcome of many intersections - experience of several partitions in the North-East of India with its subsequent unfoldings situate Shillong at the juncture of this spatial and corporeal experience. Encountering the “other” through one's body as a mirror reflection is extrapolated by space - “that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits” (Lefebvre 25). Lefebvre construes space as an initial encounter of the body in its entirety to the corporeal existence of the other. We shall look at Shillong as a representational space- lived, imagined and evoked in nostalgia for writers of conflict. Space is omnib- absorbent where “everything comes together.” (Soja), where the metaphysical meets material, history meets lived experience, ideological meets agency, the concrete meets abstract, etc.

Keywords: Heterotopia, geocriticism, spatial struggle, xenophobia, urban ethnic clash.

Shillong as a ‘heterotopia’ in the author’s imagination modifies cultural memory to history of displacement and conflict, urban ethnic clashes, xenophobia, nostalgic ties to lands, changing cultural milieu, foreigner’s complex and militant interventions. Foucault describes heterotopia as a “counter-site” that exists within and beyond a physical space and fundamentally contests or inverts it, by allowing deviance for individuals. Post-Partition, India’s North-East has been destabilized by various factors of inclusive vs exclusive paradigms. In such times Shillong as an ontological exploration of an active locus determining lives as in ‘heterotopia’ after Partition 1947, emerges as themes and metaphors in fictional and non-fictional accounts. Foucault's “other spaces” is an interrogative locus where layers of spaces work simultaneously to form a juxtaposition. He calls it “an epoch of simultaneity”(6) “the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space”(90). Shillong as a heterotopia engages in the writer's imagination like a peace abode and a daunting challenge. The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a

single real place, several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”(217) - “a whole series of places that are foreign to each other”(224).

With the establishment of Assam Province in 1912, after the first Bengal Partition, Shillong became a capital city of melting pot where tribal culture met unprecedented urban inflow. Shillong has witnessed a shift from a largely agrarian society to a mercantile station. The rooted local markets (*haats*) which were once backbone to the tribe ethnicity of Khasi-Jaintia hills subsequently transformed into labour intensive markets. Areca nuts, beetles, pepper and oranges from the foothills were traded for rice and fish in Sylhet and people on both sides of the border had fairly created a syncretic communal space in colonial times : “Shillong drew entrepreneurs from Rajasthan-the slick Marwaris; traders from Sindh and Bombay followed. The planters took welcome breaks from the monotony and difficulties of the routine day so did British officers and their families”(Hazarika 126).

The refugee influx post-Partition 1947, changed demographics forever and destabilized the region. This ontological space of memory and transition, of rooted desires and displaced identities feed into the later generations as a void, strange location that both exists and does not - as something which is home and yet not homely. With Partition came reshuffling of people on religious lines creating rifts and setbacks for an established society. A Muslim Bengali, Nepali, Marwari or Punjabi soon took the identifier of a *dkhar* (foreigner) with “do not belong” sentiments, and the land turned into a space which by default was rights of the indigenous. The 2009-2010 riots in Meghalaya are a reminder of the continuing challenges in a multiethnic cosmopolitan space precariously laden with animosity. Such a space has been protected politically as a specially protected zone under the sixth schedule of the Constitution- unapproachable by an outsider and hence impenetrable by any external influence or change. Siddhartha Deb’s *Point of Return* (2002), returns to the point of argument - whose lands, whose home and why? An open ended closure in any form of fiction written on space is crucial for its intangible essence. Deb has suffered through the pages to make an ambiguous ending for an ambiguous life without homeland. It is true to the narrator’s experience of being born a generation ahead of the displacement. Shillong as a space of belonging is abstracted by the experience of strangeness and otherness felt by the narrator. Police Bazaar in Siddhartha Deb’s imagination transpires fear for its distorted, “collapsed” and “condensed” inhospitable version that lays ring of assault. Recollecting the act of returning home, Deb writes,

“What it meant to be an outsider to a final settlement of accounts. Past and present brought face-to-face at last, strung out on two ends of the long run; father and son, characters and narrator, the town and self, all come together-here, now, at this whirling, dizzy point of vertigo” (231).

The space where subjective experiences collapse with socio-political self is a vertigo. It is at once Foucault's "mirror" that reflects real space but subtracts the person from that space by placing him on the mirror. Being at two places at once is the quality of mind of a displaced person. This quality of statelessness is essentially superimposed by the reality of his being as an 'other'. Even statelessness is a space that is like a warzone of the mind, where one constantly struggles to anchor the being to a belonging. The intangibility of this space makes it dangerous, hidden and concealed. It is beyond the concrete infrastructural, and architectural dimensions.

Space, according to Lefebvre's Marxist interpretations, is active, productive and produced. In its dynamic, continuous construction, space becomes intimate to a subject's identity. Massey invites us to think about Space as a social reality that grounds an individual to his sociality. But this would mean an unawareness of the natural space and environment. The physical space then holds the personal space and also embodies the mental space. The mental space is one that is "representational" and hence it is conceived (Lefebvre). In post-Partition diaspora studies one has to particularly look into this labyrinth to deconstruct ethnic fundamentalism and its unfolding.

Janice Pariat, a prolific poet, novelist and critic from Shillong in a short piece *Embassy*, details the geographical, ethnic and personal space of a cosmopolitan Shillong. And meticulously notes the changing environments of a society by situating characters in a limited space of a bar. "Even if Embassy had changed hands a thousand times, from one *dkhar* to another, nobody inside knew; a few didn't care" (12). The *dkhar* or foreigner is a hostile being that lives and breeds in the space of a legitimate owner. This legitimacy is often characterized by time- or how long his ancestors have held proprietary of the physical space. The *dkhar* is also alien to the cultural space which belongs to the majoritarian ethnic community. For Pariat, the *dkhar* is described as unnoticeable, so much so that he is invisible. After Shillong's break from Assam Province and then undivided Assam, it emerged as an independent capital city of a sovereign state in 1972. The Assamese, Nepali, Marwari and Bengali speaking communities who had erstwhile settled down due to British convergence turned outsiders. Pariat who is herself of a mixed lineage carefully sketches the struggle for spatiality and spatial acceptance in Shillong. The protagonist, Tei who encounters an old friend in the bar unfolds several ethnic fissures over a conversation. Lang who happened to be part of the infamous KSU agitation narrates the tribulations of an indigenous tribe that shed blood for recognition and ownership. But his memory and articulation is as ambiguous as history can be when dependent on subjective experience. To borrow Kant, this space is "subjective and ideal" (16). In a drunken interaction with his friend, he unveils the innermost feelings of despise for a '*dkhar*'. This is a subjective consciousness that runs through the hills and remains as porous as the India-Bangladesh barbed wire. Ever since the Partition of 1947 and even after the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), the North-East has faced

unprecedented immigrants. Most of them fled for economic stability and better natural resources. Statistically noting on the population growth of Muslims in North-East, Hazarika writes “Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur reported growth rates of between 34 percent to nearly 75 per cent.”(Hazarika, 232). This alarming rate of growth agonized the cultural-ethnic space of Khasi-Jaintia-Garo communities. Pariat in yet another moving short piece of work meditates upon stereotypical binaries of friends vs foe, purity vs pollution in a cosmopolitan space determined by historical migratory patterns. In the very beginning she subtly superimposes the physical space of a safe urban city - Shillong with its “hidden” and “concealed” parts where “enemy” lurks against the friendly gaming environment of “rooftops” “terraces” and “parks”. Playing and combatting, friendship and enmity are ambiguously synonymous terms for Suleiman. His parents had migrated to Shillong from another distant northern state for a better life leaving him a ‘dkhar’ confined to this “square piece of ground” with KSU rallies and agitations overtaking most of the “open spaces”(8). Therefore, it may well be noted that Shillong is not a static space, like people believe any geographical entity to be. Like a Harappan city in the modern era, Shillong evolved into a confluence of many ethno-cultural rivers as Marwaris, Sindhis, Bengalis and others benefited in the trade hotspot. Shymchyshyn had noted, space also incorporates taste, smell, touch and other sensory experiences. “I used to love going there and revealing in different aromas of soaps and powders.” writes Sawain as she makes aware her readers of the cosmopolitan market space inhabited by Hindus, Muslims and Christians in *Shadow Men* (2010). Shillong becomes the center of the narrative unlike its history or chronotope. Memory and space are quintessential to the subjective “being” which identifies itself in relation to the cosmos of ethnic presence. The narrator describes Kmie U Flin in terms of “her place...belonging to a clan that once ruled the hima of Mawsynram.”(12) Raseel Babbar lived even in a space that is unapproachable by tangible momentum:her mental space where strange hallucinations guided her instincts. Nostalgia which was supposed as immigrant psychosis in the 1930s with literal meaning to homecoming (“nostos”) in distress (“algos”), is anchored in Shillong as a violent return to a safe haven marred with bloodshed. “Here” and “there”, “private” and “public” are consecutive binaries of violent places. With Khasi agitation at the outskirts of the locus from where the narration takes place, the main characters are on looking over a space that is hostile with “outsiders”.

Anjum Hasan in her celebrated collection *Street on the Hill* (2006) which is self explanatory of the importance of place in the imagination of its prominent poet, elaborates upon a small passing town in a stream-of-consciousness style. She laments upon the passing of time in Mawlai, that is powerful enough to eradicate what one perceives as absolute. The pain of returning to a place which has transpired into an “unreality” with its transcendental abilities reflects human experiences. The hill emerges as a powerful sensory awareness evoking childhood memories, innocence, perfectly poised pastoral scenes with “waxy

red flowers” and “pomegranate trees”. Such peaceful instincts are challenged by “*I Love This Dirty Town*” where “unclean” street food and its aromas makes the marketplace enigmatic and exotic; a “delicious taboo”. Again, Police Bazaar as a crux of an encircular space, like the neutron of an atom presents itself struggling for balance. It is stuck between an ideal place of colonial past with sleek Scottish aesthetics to the modern ugly chaos - “that Police Bazaar is no longer where the upper -class excitement is.”(50)

Shillong breaks the unilateral understanding of what is “viewed as static.”(Shymchyshyn,15) and ethereal. Like the many other writers from Shillong who have indulged in the storytelling of this space, she dismantles the historical sense of an ideal colonial hangover. Bringing forth challenges and changes to this space with kaleidoscopic narratives of violence and atonement - evoking a Christian meta-narrative of crucifixion and rebirth. Shillong has undergone a metaphysical shift like the Umiang gorge scoring at the rough edges before transforming into a pristine lake. Beneath its aesthetic appearance lies the struggle for spatiality and recognition. Looking “east” into this heterotopia, one encounters this town with the wonder of a Wordsworthian cloud but fails to cope with the raining adversities.

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Quest for an Authentic Identity in *Fasting, Feasting & Clear Light of Day*

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Abstract: Gender roles and expectations have existed since the beginning of civilisation, and they eventually were used as instruments of oppression against women to uphold the values of a patriarchal societal structure. To disrupt this suffocating structure, women writers have used their pens as weapons by shedding light on the struggles of women and critically examining gender in a world that bases its discrimination on superficial distinctions. Widely recognized as an Indian feminist writing in English, Anita Desai uses her novels *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) to shed light on the intricacies, conflicts and power struggles in traditional Indian families. In both the texts, the age-old notion of woman's position as being innately inferior to man has been questioned, and the author has exposed the social and conventional traditions through which women are trained to play a subservient role in their families. Since their childhood, women are taught to endure hardships under the pretext of family honour and modesty, and are given a false notion of themselves as being unworthy of having an autonomous identity. They grow a tendency to live only for others and end up leading a life of self-negation, and societal roles and identities forced on them ultimately become tools to suppress them and their sense of 'self'. This paper seeks to explore the journey that the protagonists of the said novels, Uma and Bim, embark on in pursuit of their authentic identity and eventually proclaim their emancipation as a sovereign human being.

Keywords: Authenticity, Culture, Feminism, Identity.

Introduction

"The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are." — C.G. Jung

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre opines that an authentic self is being our true self rather than performing an identity by giving up our freedom and adopting false values to conform to society's ideals. From an existential-humanist perspective, the quest for authenticity means the desire to be the architect of one's own life.

Feminist theorists hold that a patriarchal society denies women their authentic selves. The sex/gender distinction is at the heart of much feminist critical debate and discourse. Many feminist theorists consider sex as a biological given and gender as a social construct. Linda Nicholson calls this 'the coat-rack view' of gender: our sexed bodies are like coat racks and *"provide the site upon which gender [is] constructed"*

(1994).

In her seminal text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed that "*one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.*" (1949). The statement implies that social roles and expectations determine one's identity as a woman and this identity imposed upon a woman denies her authentic existence and is the root cause of her misery. Women are thus oppressed as women and "*by having to be women*" (Rubin 1975).

Considered as some of Anita Desai's best works, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) are both set in India and have similar settings of patriarchy, differential treatment of men and women and the women's journey to find their authentic selves. The female characters behave strictly within the bounds of 'proper behaviour', because the society would not accept them otherwise.

Self-Negating Existence

The female protagonists in both the novels are very similar in certain ways. They both live a life of self-negation and are seen to be conforming to the societal roles imposed on them. The first part of *Fasting, Feasting* focuses on Uma, an aging spinster, who is expected to be an obedient daughter, an affectionate and motherly sister and everything but an individual.

"All morning Mama Papa have found things for Uma to do. It is as if Papa's retirement is to be spent in this manner sitting on the red swing in the veranda with Mama, rocking, and finding ways to keep Uma occupied." (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting*, 126)

MamaPapa are deaf and blind to the needs of Uma and feel that if she is kept occupied with some work, she shall not get time to think of her own dreams. Since she is the eldest daughter of the house, and still unmarried, it is expected that she should at least make herself 'useful' to her family by working for them, with no regard to the toll that this takes on her. After the birth of Arun, Uma has been trained to sacrifice her private pleasures and personal desires at the altar of familial responsibilities and she plays the subservient role ever since.

Clear Light of Day is primarily concerned with the Das family. Both the parents in the Das family are very self-involved and do not give time to their children. Their absence in their children's life is such that, even their death did not affect the young kids much, because it was almost as if they were at the club or away for work.

“Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others- to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them.” (Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, 149)

Because of such a tumultuous family life, the eldest sibling, Bim, had to step up as the motherly figure to her siblings. Even though she voluntarily takes on the role as the head of the family, the familial responsibilities are too much for her to balance at her young age and they weigh heavily on her life and decisions. She harbours a bitterness towards her parents and siblings, as she thinks that it is because of them that she is sacrificing the carefree part of herself.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is a major running theme in *Fasting, Feasting*, and it manifests both in India and America. While both in India and America, men are expected to be hard working, academic, and successful, the social value of women is dependent on their submissiveness, domestic abilities, beauty and child bearing, with little to no importance on their personal goals, needs and wants. Mama becomes a tool for upholding the suffocating societal ideals that women are follow, and she reinforces these problematic ideas by passing on the things she was taught as a young girl to her daughters.

“Mama said, ‘In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.’”
(Desai, 6)

The differential treatment towards men and women stems from childhood, and the aforementioned quotation shows how even little joys like good food were secured away and given only to the boys in the family. This propagated the idea that being born as a man automatically gave you a superiority and authority that will always be out of reach of the ‘inferior’ gender, i.e., women.

Even Mama, the only woman in the household who had some semblance of authority, had no idea of self and over the many years of being married, she had blended in with her husband, and her only identity was that of being a powerful man’s wife. Uma calling her parents MamaPapa in one breath is symbolic of how her mother has latched on to her father for a sense of identity for herself, and led a *“Siamese twin existence.”*

The characters of Uma and Anamika were probably the most affected by the gender discrimination and societal ideals. Uma was a motivated but not a very smart student, and was forced to leave school to take care of her baby brother, while also expected to take up the household chores and make herself ‘useful’

around the house. When she old enough, MamaPapa tried to marry her off multiple times, but they failed every time. In fact, they were so desperate to get her off their hands that they even tried to get her married by giving a hefty dowry once, which led to a fraud, and by actually marrying her to a much older man, who eventually left her. Once they realised that they could not get her married, their bitterness and hostility towards her only grew, and they started to make her work harder around the house and also conveniently ignored her needs, even when they were medical needs, like her needing a pair of glasses, because Papa felt that any money spent on Uma would be a waste.

While Uma is shown as a character who is unwanted even by her own family, Anamika embodies everything that an 'ideal woman' should be. She is beautiful, smart, nurturing and is also very well-versed when it comes to household chores. She is portrayed as a warm and charming character, who is loved and admired by everyone she meets, young or old. However, she too was not immune to the weight of gender roles placed on her. Her 'modern' parents refuse to let her go to Oxford University on a scholarship that she earned, and instead, they use her scholarship letter as a way to brag about her intelligence and to get her better marriage proposals. She is ultimately married off to an older man, and right from the start the marriage is doomed. She is extremely ill-treated by her husband and in-laws, and they beat her and overwork her regularly, which ultimately led to a miscarriage that resulted in her becoming infertile. The perfect persona of Anamika shatters at this point in the story, as an infertile woman, she is now "*flawed*" and "*damaged goods*."

"Uma said, 'I hope they will send her back. Then she will be happy with Lila Aunty again.'

'You are so silly, Uma.' Mama snapped. 'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?'" (Desai, 68)

Her mistreatment at the hands of her in-laws was not a secret to her family, and yet, the shame of bringing a married daughter home was more than a sense of urgency to bring her to safety. Even though she possessed all the 'womanly' qualities that the society asks of women, her story had a very tragic ending, when she was burned to death, and this was allegedly not a suicide, but done by her in-laws. Anamika's story shows that a patriarchal society is not designed with women's best interest in mind, and even women who conform to society's idea of an 'ideal woman' have to ultimately suffer.

Hybridization

In order to assert their existence, the female characters try to speak and behave like men. Bim and Tara's struggle against the patriarchal society in *Clear Light of Day* is illustrated by their hybridity, when for example, they choose to do "*anything they liked*" because "*Raja was not back from school and everybody*

at home was asleep". They take their chance to enter patriarchal society by trying on Raja's pants.

"They pranced about the room in their trousers, feeling grotesquely changed by them not only in appearance but in their movements, their abilities. Great possibilities unexpectedly opened up now that they had their legs covered so sensibly and practically." (Desai, 202)

"If she had pockets, if she had cigarettes, then it was only natural to swagger, to feel rich and superior and powerful." (Desai, 203)

To put on a pair of pants signifies masculinity and superiority, and when they tried on those trousers, they entered the world of masculinity through hybridization. While men find it easy to form a sense of authentic identity for themselves, it is not the case for women. Women are seen according to the roles assigned to them, not as individuals. Thus, putting Raja's pants on and holding a pack of cigarettes gave both Bim and Tara a taste of the freedom that their brother enjoyed, and allowed them the autonomy to emulate the *"fine, careless swagger"* that he possessed.

Past Memory and Nostalgia

Because of the very constricting life of Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, a sense of privacy and nostalgia is what helps her keep her individuality alive. She is suppressed under societal norms and familial duties, which leaves her frustrated, and the only place where she finds comfort is in her collection of Christmas cards and bangles.

"Of course she knows what to do: she reaches to the top for a shoebox full of old Christmas cards.... She binds them all up again with string and stows them away like treasure- to her they are treasure. If anyone were to touch them, their magic would somehow be defaced: that is how she feels about them." (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting*, 93)

They are the remnants of her childhood and whenever she finds her present aimless existence too dreary to tolerate, she escapes into that world again. This is her kind of escape from the controlling life she has been brought up in and this gives her a sense of privacy in her chaotic life.

Similarly, in *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's current life dwells in the past that shaped her: the same house, the same routine, old papers kept, rooms never changing their decor.

"Old Delhi does not change. It only decays." (Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, 5)

Bim compares herself to Old Delhi, which remains unchanged and highly uneventful. She says that Old Delhi isn't capable of any sort of change and so it will decay as it is, much like Bim's situation and

monotonous existence.

The Moment of Epiphany

Even though both Uma and Bim are lost in their duties, what sparks in them a sense of individuality is an epiphanic moment. In Uma's case, while she was holding the vessel of Anamika's ashes she finds it hard to believe that Anamika is dead. Uma feels that her entire life has been dull and lifeless and she cannot decide if it is Anamika who is dead, or she herself. It is at this moment that she decides to take charge of her life.

"Uma dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and pours it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire" (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting*, 140)

This scene from *Fasting, Feasting* is almost like a self-immolation scene, where Uma sets fire to her old, subservient self and a new person is born. Uma learns to assert her authority in this new-found identity, as is seen when she says *"I told the cook to make puri-alu for breakfast and have it ready."* (Desai, 147). Up until now she was always taking orders from others, but starting from this moment, she starts to behave like her authentic self and asserts her authority as an individual.

Bim's epiphanic moment in *Clear Light of Day* comes while she attends a concert at her neighbour's, the Misras. She realises that her decision to take up the role as the motherly figure for her siblings was a voluntary and conscious choice on her part, and not a decision that was forced on her.

"My world is a cry at dawn." (Desai, 276)

Keeping true to the title of the novel, *Clear Light of Day*, Bim realises that as the eldest sibling, she rose up to the occasion when her life situations demanded her to, and the moment she realised this, years of bitterness she held towards her siblings flowed out of her as freely as the rhythm of the music that surrounded her. She ultimately realises that she doesn't need to sacrifice or isolate herself in order to have a positive relationship with her siblings, and this helps her take the steps to try and fix her strained bonds with Raja and Tara.

Conclusion

An authentic identity, thus, does not mean isolating oneself from the society, but having a positive relationship with the people around us, and yet, having a sense of individuality. Both the novels have very similar settings and Bim and Uma both are very similar too. However, one major difference between them

is their choice of career. Bim is a history teacher but she felt that she was meant for much bigger things and that her family was a hindrance to that, while Uma is never given a chance. When a job presents itself, Papa turns it down without asking for her opinion which shows how strong a hold her parents have on Uma's life. Despite their hardships and societal constraints, both Uma and Bim stayed in their immediate surroundings and made a life for themselves, which ultimately helped them in finding their authentic selves.

However, the other female characters in both the novels fail to do so. While Mama conforms to her role of the ideal wife, and loses out her individuality, Aruna is lost in her pursuit of being 'perfect', which ultimately results in an identity crisis. Melanie too tries to fit into the society's idea of an 'ideal' woman and falls prey to an eating disorder, and Anamika unfortunately is never given the chance to form an identity, and she dies not having found her true self.

Similarly, Tara in *Clear light of Day* is constantly torn between two identities: her real self, and the person she pretends to be in front of her husband to fit into his world.

For every Bim and Uma that find their authentic self, there are countless Mamas, Anamikas, Arunas and Taras who spend their entire life without having any sense of an individual identity, and they just seamlessly fall into the mould that the society sets out for them. The works of Anita Desai and other women writers are monumental in bringing the stories of these silenced women to the forefront, and in doing so, they are given a voice, however meek it maybe, in a world that is hell-bent on hushing them.

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Negotiating Identities: An Intersection between Diaspora and Nationalism in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract: This research paper investigates the fictional representation of the Bangladesh Liberation War in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*. The study approaches the narrative through a diasporic lens, considering the impact of cross-cultural exchange and nostalgic yearning for a homeland. The paper examines the aftermath of the war, which left deep wounds and trauma from the genocide and rape committed by the Pakistan army. The analysis focuses on the intersection of nation and sexual politics, represented through the struggle of the protagonist, Rehana, as she navigates motherhood and the usurpation of her nation by patriarchy. The research aims to uncover the silenced and regimented voices that emerge from a diasporic perspective, illuminating the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War and its lasting impact on individuals and communities. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the representation of historical trauma in South Asian diasporic literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, genocide, trauma, narrative, rape, sexual politics.

A Golden Age by Tahmima Anam is a fictional work that tells the story of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War from the perspective of a diasporic Bangladeshi woman named Rehana Haque. This narrative explores the socio-political upheavals of the war and delves into the personal space of the female protagonist, capturing her emotions and the sense of turmoil she experiences. The story weaves together the chaos of the Bangladesh liberation war with a poignant depiction of the struggles faced by those living in Bangladesh during the time of revolution. Rehana, who was not originally from Bangladesh, had settled there after marrying her husband Iqbal, who died at a young age, leaving her to fend for herself. Her Bihari origin initially creates a stark contrast with the Bengali nationalist ideology, and her love for the Bengali language and culture helps her understand the challenges faced by East Pakistan during the Liberation War. As Cara Cilano observes, Rehana's identity as a *muhajir* is a crucial aspect of the story, but her *muhajir* identity does not support the creation of Pakistani nationalist myths or represent any exclusion or displacement from the nation. Instead, Rehana's *muhajir* identity is gradually forgotten as she and her children become more entrenched in another nationalistic narrative. However, with the arrival of war in March 1971, Rehana becomes more and more engrossed and dedicated in creating a resistance to the West Pakistani rule, which lasts until December 1971. (122)

Rehana's story is rooted in her memories of growing up in Calcutta and how her life transformed after moving to Bangladesh. As a widowed woman, she faced challenges in surviving in East Pakistan and sought financial stability to secure a better future, leading her to become a strong, self-reliant individual. She is the mother of two children, and the novel begins with her struggle to regain custody of her children from her brother-in-law Faiz. In her despair, she found the courage to build a house of her own, which she named "Shona" (golden), and rented it to a Hindu tenant, Mr. Sengupta, despite opposition from her in-laws and sisters. She was eventually able to raise enough money to reclaim her children and bring them back to Bangladesh from Karachi. Shona became a place of refuge for them during the tumultuous events of East Pakistan, highlighting the struggle between one's identity in a home-land and host-land.

The house was nearly ten years old now and a little faded. Ten monsoons had softened its edges and drawn meandering, old-age seams into the walls. [...] It was there to remind her of what she had lost and what she had won. And how much the victory had cost. That is why she had named it Shona, gold. It wasn't just because of what it had taken to build the house, but for all the precious things she wanted never to lose again. (Anam, 18-19)

The name Shona holds significance in the novel *A Golden Age*, marking the start of a new era filled with golden aspirations. The name echoes Rabindranath Tagore's song "Amar Shonar Bangla," which unites all Bengalis through its lyrics "My golden Bengal, how I adore you." Anam's choice of the name Shona reflects her love for her motherland, as "Amar Shonar Bangla" is also the national anthem of Bangladesh. Patriarchy exerts a dual control of displacement and isolation, with Shona stabilising Rehana's previously disrupted identity within a patriarchal society. This refers to Rehana's relocated identity as a widow and her endeavours to restore it in an environment under constant observation.

Despite the lack of state-run surveillance, the catastrophic displacement caused by the partition was still a physical and psychological trauma. The large influx and outflow of people belonging to the same language group resulted in a displacement of unimaginable scale. This type of displacement occurs during the war and the systematic destruction that follows ethnic conflict (Bagchi 25). Anam depicts Rehana as a woman whose anxieties drive her inner thoughts and emotions. She primarily portrays her as a responsible mother who will do anything to guarantee the safety of her children. This novel can be viewed as a diasporic work where Anam has woven in her fears and concerns about the nation and its inhabitants. Antara Chatterjee notes how Anam's representation of the liberation war and the creation of the nation in her fiction can be considered an expression of transgenerational memory, demonstrating how the "homeland" endures and is perpetuated in the memories of generations of people connected to that place.

Anam aims to depict Bangladesh as a developing independent nation breaking away from its ties to West Pakistan. *A Golden Age* recounts Bangladesh's fight for independence from Pakistan and Rehana's role in it. The partition of 1947 resulted in new borders dividing the Indian subcontinent, separating West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The division caused distress to India, and Anam's novel portrays East Pakistan's effort to break free from West Pakistan. This struggle leads to displacement and highlights the pain of being separated from the motherland. Rehana's displacement and her struggles as a mother in Bangladesh can be viewed as a manifestation of the turmoil faced by war victims trying to protect their children in the face of nationalism. Her portrayal as a mother figure reinforces the stereotypical image of the nation as a mother and explores the politically charged site of contention. In nationalist discourse, women hold a crucial position in the representation and building of the nation-state, which is frequently revered as a female entity, particularly as a mother, with imagery of innocence, respect, and caretaking. However, this association also leaves their bodies open to being perceived as the "outsider" or the "other" (Ashfaq 31). The account of the Liberation War includes factual accounts of mass killings and extermination. The use of an omniscient narrative approach in the novel focuses on Rehana's experiences and is limited to her actions. Anam endeavours to highlight the nationalist spirit that is remarkably reflected in Rehana's voice when she comprehends her nationalist zeal. This was when Bengali nationalist sentiment became highly prevalent, distinguishing Bengali nationalism from Bangladeshi nationalism with slogans such as "Joy Bangla" (victory of Bengal).

By the end she found herself shouting Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla with the crowd, the rhythm of her words chiming with the hard thump of her chest, and she recognised, at once, the incendiary thrill of shouting. [...] Rehana suddenly felt young, plunged into a world of limitless possibility. (Anam 58)

The strong nationalist sentiment expressed in Rehana's voice forms a transnational discourse that creates a space for contestation, as Michel Foucault describes as "a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live." (Foucault, 3) The slogans used by the *Mukti Bahini* in the Liberation war embody the Bengali identity and demonstrate how, despite religious differences, Bengalis were deeply concerned about their ethnic identity within a nation. This reflects a sense of community that is comfortable exercising a set of ethnocultural values and incorporating their linguistic strengths. Cultural hybridity protects the dispersed identity of people living in East Pakistan, such as Rehana, Sohail, Maya, and Silvi, who exist on the border of two territories. The concept of dual territoriality focuses on the division between geographic and psychological entities, including the split between hostland and homeland, as exemplars aim to understand diasporic subjects, cultures, and aesthetic effects in terms of

this subjective division (Mishra 16). Steven Vertovec, in his book *Three Meanings of Diaspora*, highlights the relationship between globally dispersed yet collectively homogeneous ethnic groups as part of cultural production. Thus, it is not purity but a deeper understanding of diversity that culturally constructs the ethnic identity. The creation of hybrid cultural expressions and “new ethnicities” (as described by Hall in “Old and New”) is particularly evident among diaspora youth who have experienced primary socialisation through the intersection of diverse cultural influences. These young individuals often deliberately choose, blend, and elaborate elements of their culture and identity from multiple backgrounds (Vertovec 290).

The Bangladesh Liberation War can be viewed as a struggle of an ethnic minority against the ethnic majority. This novel allows the reader to grasp the pivotal role that the Bengali language played in shaping Bangladesh’s new identity. There was a persistent conflict between the Urdu and Bengali-speaking communities. The Bengali minority was restricted from speaking their mother tongue and pressured to adopt Urdu as their national language. This conflict, rooted in ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural values, contributed to the development of Rehana’s Bengali identity in East Pakistan. “Ever since 1948, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the Eastern wing of the country like a colony. First, they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali” (Anam, 33). For Rehana, her identity in Bangladesh was based on her ethnolinguistic community rather than her religion or nationalism. As Ishtiaq Hossain and Mahmud Hasan Khan note, “Bangla was never thought to be a ‘desh’ (an independent country) before the election of 1970 or even before March 7 1971. Although they were always Bengali, the suffix of ‘desh’ is a later appendage” (327).

A Golden Age provides a powerful portrayal of the Liberation War, as seen through the author’s perspective. The novel exposes Pakistan’s strategic violence, including the horrific details of the genocide and rape that took place during the war. On March 25, 1971, the Pakistan army launched “Operation Searchlight,” a brutal armed operation aimed at killing or arresting Bengali intellectuals, student leaders, and Awami League leaders to gain control over East Pakistan. This operation resulted in the death of approximately three million people in East Pakistan and the rape and torture of around four million women by the Pakistan army. The novel depicts in vivid detail the atrocities committed towards the people of Bangladesh. Through Rehana’s eyes, the reader is able to visualise the devastating images of bloodshed in Dhaka.

They were in front of Curzon Hall. The wet ribbon had followed them all the way, and now it poured into a gutter, which was also red, and on the side of the gutter was a pair of hands, the fingers clasped together in prayer or begging, and next to the hands was a face. [...] Beneath the clumped together strands Rehana could see an eye squeezed shut. (Anam, 73-74)

As time went on, the rapidly shifting political landscape of East Pakistan started to reveal itself. The situation became more tense when Mujibur Rahaman was arrested and taken to West Pakistan. Major Zia, the provisional commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh army, made an announcement on Free Bangla Radio Transmission declaring the independence of Bangladesh on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman and announcing the formation of a sovereign, legal government under his leadership. He called on all nations to mobilise public opinion against the brutal genocide taking place in Bangladesh. (Anam, 74) Sohail joined the Mukti Bahini and left home to fight for his country, and his mother, Rehana supported his decision. This novel is a diasporic narrative written by the author, who imbued Rehana with a touch of idealism and nationalist fervour.

Initially reluctant, Rehana was opposed to the idea of giving shelter to the Mukti Joddhas, but her motherly nature eventually led her to become protective of her children's well-being. She broke down her reservations and allowed her home to become a guerrilla headquarters where weapons were concealed and a refuge for the Mukti Joddhas as they prepared for their operation against the Pakistan army. Rehana's daughter, Maya, was a student at Dhaka University, and her own struggle for freedom took a dramatic turn with the disappearance and death of her friend Sharmeen. Sharmeen's brutal rape shook Maya to her core and empowered her to take strong action against the Pakistan army. Rehana became deeply involved in the guerrilla war when she treated a major who was wounded in an explosion at the Inter-Continental Hotel (Anam, 129). This act of kindness was partially in tribute to the officer for saving Sohail's life during the guerrilla attack. She acted as a nurturing nurse to the wounded soldiers and Major, and her connection to the war led her to develop feelings for the Major. Eventually, she fell in love with him and shared many personal secrets. Rehana's approach to their relationship highlights her candid and empathetic approach to love.

Anam is concerned with the diasporic experiences of her own, and as such, Rehana is depicted as somewhat removed from the typical Bangladeshi women born and raised there. The death of Maya's young friend deeply affected Rehana, causing her to empathise with the war victims who were being tortured and raped by the Pakistan army. The rape and death of Sharmeen, as depicted by Anam, highlights the suffering of war heroines who fell victim to rape and torture at the hands of the Pakistan army. Their bodies became spaces of domination and control for the exercise of power. In the 1990s, a few years after Bangladesh gained independence, these rape victims were referred to as Birangona or war heroines. (Mookherjee, 5) In the novel, Anam portrays Sharmeen as a dead war victim, and her death serves as a catalyst for Rehana's quest for answers from Faiz, a dominant patriarchal figure from the Pakistan army.

You listen to me. Her name was Sharmeen. They took her and they kept her at the cantonment—not a mile from your house. And the girl was tortured until she died. They did things—unspeakable things—to her. She was the same age as Maya. How do you explain that? (Anam 220)

The question asked by Rehana reflects the patriarchal power dynamics and sheds light on the sexual politics involved in the war narrative of 1971. The violence inflicted serves as a brutal means of suppressing women who challenge the status quo, and is a calculated attempt to instil fear and control the voices of marginalised groups. As Ritu Menon and Kamila Bhasin observe, the rampant acts of violence against women during communal conflicts bring to light the various forms of sexual violence that are perpetuated in a patriarchal society and serve as a symbol of the subservient status of women in gender relations between religious or ethnic communities (41).

The relationship between a woman's body and the nation is a dualistic concept that works hand-in-hand with the discourse of the nation as Nayanika Mookherjee states: "The embodiment of gendered roles as envisaged in the feminisation of the land that enables the body of the woman as mother to be available for the aestheticising impulse of the project of nationalism in Bangladesh" (Mookherjee 38). This is a powerful political act that protects both the community and family honour. When viewed from a feminist perspective, the conflict between community and nation becomes apparent. Bagchi comments that the nation, in the current postmodern attack on modernity, is a metanarrative in which the entire hegemonic establishment is implicated. There is a clear tension between community and nation in this context (20).

In Bangladesh, honouring the rape victims as "Birangonas" is a tactic to restore the dignity of the victims within the family structure and also a way of suppressing their voices. The victim is either remarried or her death is accepted as a result of the tolerance for torture. Sharmeen's death represents the end of her struggle, and her rape symbolises the enemy soldiers' assault on her motherland. Nayanika Mookherjee argues that the individual body of a raped woman can only be represented through the limited expressions of nationhood, either through her death or suicide. On the other hand, the feminisation of the land and raped women reinforce the intervention and masculine power of the nation and male relatives, ignoring the complexities present within these gender roles.

Anam, as a diasporic figure, embraces a liberal and secular approach to religion. She views religion as a peaceful means of expressing oneself rather than a tool to control others. Anam grew up with a strong socialist background instilled by her revolutionary parents. In an interview, she talked about her religious beliefs and emphasised her childhood understanding of religion from a rational perspective. Rehana, on the other hand, approaches religion with a strong spiritual connection. Her focus during religious practices is to seek blessings and comfort for her wounds. Rehana's approach to religion is a secular form of spiritual

practice, and she is a firm believer in humanity. Her prayers reflect her belief in the compassion of a higher power:

God is great.

I bear witness that there is none other worthy of worship.

...

Holy are you, and magnificent.

Come to prayer come to felicity. (Anam 128-129)

In *A Golden Age*, Anam, critiques Silvi for her overly conservative perspective on religious practices. Through Silvi's character, Anam sheds light on the communal, essentialist, and fundamentalist thought that was prevalent in Bangladesh at the time. In contrast, Rehana's approach to religion is moderate, as she believes in the freedom of religious expression and the idea that the state should not interfere with people's religious beliefs. This sets Rehana apart from her fellow citizens and emphasises her Bengali nationalist ideals of secularism. Religion plays a subtle role in the novel, as Rehana is shown reciting *Ayat-al-Kursi* and *Surah Yahseen* to bless her children. There are references to *Maghrib* prayers, *Azaan*, and details about *Iftaar* and *Roza*, all of which highlight religious tolerance. In contrast, Silvi's approach to Islamism is traumatic. The author includes intertextual references to works by Dylan Thomas, Thackeray, Rokeya Sekhawat Hossain, and Tagore, which lend a cosmopolitan outlook to the novel. The books on Sohail's shelf and the wall posters in his room reflect his interest in Communist ideology, as indicated by the presence of books by Mao Tse-Tung, Karl Marx, and Che Guevara. Major's love for Jazz music and Nina Simone's voice, Rehana's appreciation for the Indian classic *Mughl-e-Azam*, and Maya's comment about reading *Che Guevara Speak* all suggest a cosmopolitan sensibility. As Antara Chatterjee notes, in the current global landscape, nations are being reconfigured and rearticulated in new ways, influenced by diasporas and transnationalism (133). *A Golden Age* echoes these cosmopolitan themes through its themes of music, poetry, and literature, reflecting Anam's own cosmopolitan identity. Rehana's story explores the diasporic experience of "in-betweenness" and her cosmopolitan insights. Spanning over thirteen years, from 1959 to 1971, the novel covers the socio-political upheavals of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India during a time of political turmoil.

The novel sheds light on the ways in which individuals' identities can be compromised in a world dominated by men in power and how the process of silencing works. Rehana's final confession to her deceased husband, "I know what I have done. This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This

age has burned so many daughters has not burned mine. I have not let it” (Anam, 315), speaks to the struggles of women and their experiences of nostalgia and epiphany in a newly liberated country still grappling with the aftermath of the liberation war. In this sense, *A Golden Age* is a conscious attempt to give voice to marginalised perspectives that have been silenced throughout history.

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