Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture

General
Vol. 9 No.1 (January 2024)

Women’s Initiatives
Editorial Board

G. S. Jayasree
Chief Editor | gsjayasree@samyuktaresearchfoundation.org
Former Professor and Head, Institute of English, University of Kerala
Contact Address - Krishnapurathu House, Kesavadasapuram, Pattom P. O.
Thiruvananthapuram, Pin Code-695 004
http://gsjayasree.com/

Sreedevi K. Nair
Managing Editor | sreedevi@samyuktaresearchfoundation.org
Former Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English, NSS College for Women, Neeramankara, Thiruvananthapuram
Contact Address - Sreeniketh, PURA 10, Netaji Road,
Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram- 695 012
https://sreedeviknair.net/

S. Devika
Editor | devika@nsscollege4women.edu.in
Principal, NSS College for Women, Neeramankara, Thiruvananthapuram.
Contact Address - E 34, Sastri Nagar, Karamana, Thiruvananthapuram- 695002.
https://nsscollege4women.edu.in

P. M. Arathi
Editor | devika@nsscollege4women.edu.in
Assistant Professor, School of Indian Legal Thought, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.
https://silt.mgu.ac.in/dr-arathi-p-m/

Shalini M.
Editor | shalinim@cukerala.ac.in
Assistant Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala
https://cukerala.edu.in/shalini-moolechalil-assistant-professor&catid

Bini B.Sajil
Associate Editor | bini.bs@nirmauni.ac.in
Asst. Professor of English, Institute of Law, Nirma University, Gujarat.
Contact Address - A3 202, Springwood Residency, O P Road,
Baroda, Gujarat- 390020
https://law.nirmauni.ac.in/author/binibs/

Arya Aiyappan
Associate Editor | ary.aiyappan@christuniversity.in
Assistant Professor, Department of English, English and Cultural Studies, Bangalore Central Campus
https://christuniversity.in/english/faculty-details/MTIhMA==/DTA=
Divya S
Assistant Editor | divyasravindranathan@samyuktaresearchfoundation.org
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bishop Moore College, Mavelikara, Alappuzha Dist, Kerala-690 110
http://bishopmoorecollege.org/dr-divya-s/

Lakshmi Sukumar
Assistant Editor | drlakshmisukumar@keralauniversity.ac.in
lakshmisukumarsept22@gmail.com
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Institute of English,
Kerala University
https://keralauniversity.ac.in/dept/staff-Details

Rajasree R
Assistant Editor | rajasree.r@sdcollege.in
Assistant Professor, Department of English, S D College, Alappuz
Editorial

This issue of *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* brings together a collection of articles delving into the intricacies of social, political, and mediated narratives that construct and inform women's lived realities. Challenging the socially normalized perceptions of women's identities and experiences, the articles provide valuable insights into how women assert their agency in a male-dominated world plagued by social and political violence. “Woman and Militant Nationalism: Srijit Mukherji’s *Rajkahini* and the Issue of Partition” by Tania Chakraverty unsettles the Madonna-Whore binary through a reading of *Rajkahini* that depicts the active participation of prostitutes in a brothel in scripting a form of militant nationalism during the Indian Independence Movement. “Battling Binaries: The Psychosocial Endurance of Gender Constructs in West Asian War Fiction” by Manisha Bhadran challenges the grammar and vocabulary used to navigate the experiential world of conflict zones in the contemporary world. The paper problematizes the stereotypes of the binaries like civilian / combatant and home / front to situate women in war zones as active participants in the conflict. “Survivor Narratives and the Politics of Echnukutty’s Memoir” by T. Amiya and “Voices of Resistance: Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry” by Karthika S are discussions of powerful narratives of and by women that further challenge the victim / survivor binary. Echnukutty’s memoir as well as Meena Kandasamy’s poems are verbal attacks against the violence of casteist and patriarchal discourses by women who refuse to be bogged down by discrimination and violence. Visual narratives disseminated mostly through broadcast and digital media play a seminal role in conditioning social perceptions. In this hypermediated world of visual narratives, “Virtual Discrimination: Advertisements and Self Image” by Corrine Rita War discusses the tropes and metaphors frequently used in advertisements that aid and abet the patriarchal structures. As any discussion of women’s issues cannot be confined to a select set of disciplines but demands a trans-disciplinary approach. “Empowering Women through Self Help Groups led Microcredit: A Novel Initiative” by Veena Renjini K K takes us through the new forms of economic interventions targeted towards enhancing the empowerment of women. This issue concludes with a paper that challenges the prevailing paradigm of feminist discourse, which frequently restricts itself to explicit gender debates. “Exploring the Division of Labour in the Family: Insights from Women in the Service Sector in Darjeeling Town” by Ritu Mangar is a sociological study of the negotiations of working women with the gendered spatialities of the domestic sphere. In "Celebrification through Media Spectacles: Emerging Forms of Performativity in Indian Politics," Lakshmi Sukumar offers a critical examination of the burgeoning mediated culture of political performances in India. The analysis reveals that while the narrative constructions of male politicians are characterized by power and control, the representations and performances of female politicians continue to emphasize their femininity.

In conclusion, this issue aims to redefine the boundaries of contemporary academic discussions on women's issues through an analysis of diverse narrative constructions. To maintain the academic rigour of the discussion, texts from varied domains—literary, visual,
and social—have been included. This approach aids in mapping the fluid boundaries of literary and cultural texts, thereby challenging conventional patriarchal rhetoric that offers a reductive understanding of women's agency.
# Table of Contents

**Samyukta 2024 Jan. - June**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Woman and Militant Nationalism: Srijit Mukherji’s <em>Rajkahini</em> and the Issue of Partition</td>
<td>Tania Chakraverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Battling Binaries: The Psychosocial Endurance of Gender Constructs in West Asian War Fiction</td>
<td>Manisha Bhadran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Exploring the Division of Labour in the Family: Insights from Women in the Service Sector in Darjeeling Town</td>
<td>Ritu Mangar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Empowering Women through Self Help Groups led Microcredit: A Novel Initiative</td>
<td>Veena Renjini KK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Survivor Narratives and the Politics of Echmukutty’s Memoir</td>
<td>T. Amiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Virtual Discrimination: Advertisements and Self Image</td>
<td>Corrine Rita War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Voices of Resistance: Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry</td>
<td>Karthika S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Celebrification through Media Spectacles: Emerging Forms of Performativity in Indian Politics</td>
<td>Lakshmi Sukumar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Woman and Militant Nationalism: Srijit Mukherji’s *Rajkahini* and the Issue of Partition**

Tania Chakravertty  
Dean of Students Welfare  
Diamond Harbour Women’s University  
Calcutta  
Mail ID: apriltania@gmail.com

---

**Abstract:** *Rajkahini* represents Srijit Mukherji’s tryst with the concepts of nationalism, national identity and each character’s personal identity with respect to India’s partition. Partition has been critiqued vis-à-vis the ‘two nations’ theory, and Imperialism. With partition, the communion shared between people gets threatened, the border becomes the signifier of unspeakable horrors. The (feminine?) nation is prostituted, raped, maimed and traumatized by colonial power. Mukherji plays deftly with the idea of satidaha in his portrayal of the prostitutes under Begum Jaan, who get entangled in political violence and show traits of militant nationalism. The sati here acquires and retains possession of her own body and self and voluntarily annihilates the body.

**Keywords:** Partition, National Identity, Selfhood, ‘Two Nations Theory, Prostitute, Rape Identity

He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate  
Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date  
And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,  
But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect  
Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot,  
And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot,  
But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,  
A continent for better or worse divided. (Excerpt from “Partition” by W. H. Auden).

The film *Rajkahini* represents filmmaker Srijit Mukherji’s tryst with the concepts of nationalism, national identity and simultaneously each character’s personal identity vis-à-vis
the issue of the partition of India. The concepts of ‘Nation’ and that of ‘Identity’ become very important in our study of Rajkahini. We may begin with Ernest Renan’s definition of a Nation. Renan writes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (19).

In a land like India, with a multiplicity of races, castes, religions and languages, there may not be a common possession of a rich legacy of memories but there has always been the desire to live together and perpetuate the values of being Indian. Renan continues, “[t]o have common glories in the past, and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions of being a people” (19).

The conflict in Rajkahini begins to take shape with the issue of partition. Rituparna Roy refers to two different responses to partition. The first set of responses she mentions are the official histories of Pakistan and the ‘two nations’ theory which states that “the Pakistani nation was the inevitable crystallization of the desire of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent to remain a distinctive community, separate from the Hindu population around them” (13). Roy makes a special mention of Aitzaz Ahsan’s The Indus Saga and the Making of Pakistan (1996). If there are diverse opinions as to why the partition happened, there are also diverse thoughts related to the question as to who was/were to blame for it. Not just historians, but lay persons also believe that the person most to blame was Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Indians view him, as Roy mentions, not as the father of the new nation, Pakistan but “as a collaborator of the Raj; a man who, in his capacity as the leader of the All India Muslim League, precipitated the division of India by being willing to accept nothing short of a sovereign state for the Muslims in the subcontinent in the final negotiations with the British that led to the transfer of power in 1947” (14). On the 70th anniversary of the Radcliffe Line,
in a review titled “70 Years of the Radcliffe Line: Understanding the Story of Indian Partition”, Akhilesh Pillalamarri analyses how the border between India and Pakistan was decided. He too refers to the ‘two nation’ theory as the basic principle underlying the border, and the decision to partition India itself. Calling the All-India Muslim League that represented the Muslims of British India the main proponent, he quotes a speech delivered in Lahore in 1940 by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the movement. Jinnah stated:

… It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literature. They neither intermarry nor interdine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspect on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, different heroes, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and, likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built for the government of such a state. (Quoted in Pillalamarri, 2017)

The speech makes it evident that the Muslim League wanted the Muslim-majority provinces of British India to form their own country. Pillalamarri explains that the Indian National Congress, though dominated by Hindus, was however secular in nature, and resisted partition until 8th March, 1947. The Congress, he says, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, soon to be India’s first Prime Minister, envisioned a more centralized, homogeneous state. In order to achieve the aims of the Congress too, partition was thought to be necessary. The other set of responses to the issue of partition mentioned by Rituparna Roy are those of the group of historians who belong to the mainstream of Indian nationalism. Indian historians have blamed imperialism for tearing the two communities of Hindus and Muslims apart, disrupting the bonds that had joined them together for centuries. To the imperialists, says
Roy, “the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the logical conclusion of the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British by which they had insidiously played off the Hindus against the Muslims in India … this was a political strategy that the British had hit upon from the time of the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and had pursued with a single-minded zeal ever since” (14). Director Srijit Mukherji takes this stand and shows Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias, childhood friends, now pitted against each other as pawns of the British Raj. British imperialists and historians had a different version altogether. They rather took pride in claiming that during British rule they had induced and nurtured unity between diverse communities of India. In fact, to them, essential differences among the Indian communities eventually led to the division and bloodshed during the last few decades of British rule. Roy in her discussion mentions a pioneering study of Jinnah by historian Ayesha Jalal of Pakistani origin. According to Jalal, the partition was forced upon Jinnah by the Congress High Command in the final phases of British rule in India. To Roy, “the actual reason behind the Partition was not the scheme of the British but the constitutional tussle for greater representational power in the government that had gone on for close to four decades, between the Congress and the Muslim League” (14). One must admit however that the man who must bear the lion’s share of the blame is none other than the British Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten.

Lord Earl Louis Mountbatten officially became Viceroy on 24th March, 1947. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India who preceded Lord Mountbatten, had already drawn up a border, and Lord Mountbatten the new Viceroy, in June 1947 commenced the task of implementing the 1947 Indian Independence Act that would partition British India into two independent dominions. Very soon, in mid-August 1947 two nations with three divisions were destined to be born – India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan. To make a decision which was ‘impartial’ and ‘unbiased’, English Barrister and Vice-President of the London Bar Association, Sir Cyril Radcliffe was commissioned to demarcate the states of Punjab and Bengal and thereby determine which territories to assign to which country. Lord Listowel, the then Secretary of State for India had proposed Sir Radcliffe’s name for appointment as head of the Boundary Commissions for both Punjab and Bengal to which Lord Mountbatten and both Nehru and Jinnah agreed. “I feel there is a Punjabi and Bengali consciousness which has evoked loyalty to their province and so I felt it was essential that the people of India
themselves should decide this question of partition” (Quoted by Mahesh), stated Lord Mountbatten in a radio broadcast addressed to the people. Unfortunately, Sir Radcliffe had little knowledge of the subcontinent, and had never visited British India; in fact he had never been east of Paris. He was given two Hindu and two Muslim lawyers to help him in the task in just about five weeks. According to records, “Radcliffe barely knew where Punjab and Bengal were, yet he accepted the job as a man with a deep sense of duty” (Mahesh).

On 8th July, 1947, Sir Radcliffe went to Delhi to head the Boundary Commission to demarcate the boundaries between India and Pakistan. On 10th July, 1947, under the aegis of Lord Mountbatten the modalities of demarcation and division were finalized. R. K. Kaushik, Secretary, Punjab Government, says that, “Radcliffe meticulously avoided meeting political leaders and advised them to present their vaulting demands in the formal sittings of commission in Lahore and Calcutta” (Kaushik). The reason is easy to gauge. The boundaries were bound to cause contention between the Congress and the Muslim League; more so because Jinnah had initially wanted the United Nations Organisation to demarcate the two nations, later discarding the thought as the procedure would be a rather lengthy one.

Two boundary commissions were constituted before the arrival of Sir Radcliffe, one for Bengal and the other for Punjab. The Bengal Boundary Commission appointed Justice C. C. Biswas and Justice B. K. Mukherji as Congress nominees; and Justice Abu Saleh Akram and Justice S. A. Rehman as Muslim League nominees and in the Punjab Boundary Commission, Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan and Justice Teja Singh were appointed by the Congress and Justice Din Mohammad and Justice Muhammad Munir by the Muslim League. All the eight nominees were high court judges. The public sittings of the commission relating to the Province of Bengal took place in Calcutta from 16th to 24th July barring Sunday the 20th and those of the Punjab Boundary Commission took place in Lahore from 21st to 31st July except Sunday the 27th. Sir Radcliffe visited Calcutta and Lahore as chairperson of both the Bengal and Punjab commissions. As the proceedings for both Commissions were simultaneous, obviously Sir Radcliffe could not attend the public sittings in Calcutta and Lahore, held in their respective high courts; he kept on studying the proceedings and the records submitted. The public sittings relating to the Sylhet district were held from 4th to 6th August. None of the commissions reached a consensus. Available documents testify that Sir
Radcliffe showed the original draft of the proposed award to the Viceroy and Governor-General on 9th August, 1947 over lunch in the house of Lord Mountbatten’s Chief of Staff, Lord Ismay. After further deliberations, he made the award in terms which deviated from the first draft. The boundaries on both sides were finalized on 12th August, but deliberately held back and announced on 17th August 1947, presumably to avoid confusion and chaos on Independence Day – 15th August for India and 14th for Pakistan – and also allegedly because the Viceroy and the last British Governor-General of India, did not want the question of boundaries to receive priority over the independence day celebrations he would have to preside over in Karachi and Delhi. Yet a horrifying turmoil began sweeping throughout the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. Pillalamari states, “[a]s a result, when India and Pakistan became independent, some border districts incorrectly believed themselves to be one or the other of those two countries, when in fact, the opposite was the case” (Pillalamari). Indeed, there could not have been any citizen who could remain unmoved by the impact of India’s partition. India’s partition is indeed more than a historical fact; the impact was such that it continues to affect all “post-colonial denizen[s] of the subcontinent possessing a sense of history and living in the post-independence era (Roy 13).

As shown by Mukherji in Rajkahini, with partition, the communion shared between people suddenly gets threatened, and the border becomes the signifier of unspeakable horrors. As Amitav Ghosh does in The Shadow Lines, Mukherji too uses the house metaphor, in order to show the moral horror regarding the partition of Bengal. This is how Ghosh demonstrates the partition of the nation as the division of the house between two brothers, Thamma’s father and her uncle. The narrator writes:

Soon things came to such a pass that they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall: there was no other alternative. But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one could get through them any more; it had also gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode. The brothers even partitioned their father’s old nameplate. It was
divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves… (Ghosh 123).

Apparently sugar-coated with humour, delving deeper one would comprehend how the division of the family invariably leads to an irreversible violation of a moral order. Such indeed was the horror of the partition of India, the Radcliffe Line ploughing right through two doorways in such a manner and with such severity that no one would be able to get through them anymore. Instead of one nameplate, India, soon there would be two nameplates on the world map, India and Pakistan because of the line named after and drawn by a gentleman who had never visited India and knew nothing about the land and its culture.

*Rajkahini* can be viewed as a film that exposes the horrors faced by a nation prostituted in the name of nationalism. The picture presents us with a victimized (feminine?) nation raped, maimed and traumatized by colonial power. In keeping with my syllogism, it is natural that the ‘house’ that Mukherji showcases in *Rajkahini*, is one that shelters prostitutes, all protégées of Begum Jaan. The women face confusion when they try to fathom the concept of the border, much like Amitav Ghosh’s Thamma. On the question of borders, Ghosh himself said:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are ‘naturalized’ by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be ‘given’ or taken-for-granted…. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded. (Quoted in Roy 113)

Begum Jaan’s protegées begin to show traits of a “nationalism”, a trait shared with every citizen of that era. Each woman suddenly learns to grapple with the idea of nationality and the idea of partition and border, suddenly caught between belonging and citizenship. The women, belonging to the same and to different communities try to transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders.

The conflict in *Rajkahini* begins with the Radcliffe Line cutting through, i.e. creating
a partition between the brothel run by Begum Jaan, housing eleven prostitutes. Anuj Kumar in an article states in his introduction, “Set in the backdrop of Partition, it is the story of a brothel, which comes in the way of the Radcliffe Line, and its 11 sex workers led by a feisty Begum Jaan refusing to be puppets in the political game” (Kumar). The prostitutes reminisce over their past, having had different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds comprising of Hindus having had different castes, high and low, a Vaishnav and Muslims. Like Narayan’s Malgudi, this house, this plot of land with multi-faith residents represents miniature India. The name Kamala of the eldest among the lot, a guardian of sorts, who is called Thamma (Grandma), and her reading of Hindu religious scriptures reveals her religion. The Hindi remake of Rajkahini had the name of the protagonist Begum Jaan as the title too. To Anuj Kumar the title bears the suggestion that Mukherji’s central character is a Muslim woman but the director says that religion is not the issue here. “She is a Punjabi [in Rajkahini a Bengali]. She could be a Sikh or she could be a Muslim as well. She is called Begum Jaan because she received training in Lucknow. Religion is not important here” (Quoted by Kumar, 2017). Juthika with her little daughter Nolok affectionately called Bunchi, Koli, Duli, Golap bear Hindu names. Golap, probably having had a middle-class background, looks forward to marriage with Master, the school teacher with leanings towards the ideology of the Congress, who she falls in love with. Lata also called Bostami rigidly follows a vegetarian diet having been a part of the Vaishnav faith. The histrionics of a woman in the flesh trade, over the lack of seriousness of the others regarding her no-flesh diet and the rigorous practices centred around her diet and lifestyle lead to wry, ironical humour. Names such as Rubina, Banno and Fatima reveal their Muslim past. During a tiff with her friends, the other inmates, Duli reminds them that they have nowhere else to go, that they will not be taken back by their own families. Pushed to the margins, these women have little or no options. Duli, in fact reveals that she had been doubly or triply marginalized even in her pre-prostitution days, as a poor Dalit woman.

The one who joins the house last is Fatima, rechristened as Shabnam, who springs straight out of Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Khol Do” translated as “Open It”. The film begins with a little episode, integrated into the picture Rajkahini, a dramatization of Manto’s story, which rises to a crescendo with the almost dead young woman fumbling with her clothes, trying to disrobe herself. The opening of the film draws the viewers’ attention to two things
— women’s agony and rape. Susan Brownmiller says that rapes in concentration camps and camp-brothels which held women against their will by force were true aspects of the abuse of women in both the First and Second World War. Are they not sinister and true aspects of every war? Brownmiller states that war provides men with the perfect psychologic backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. In her words:

The very maleness of the military — the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of the hierarchical command — confirms for men what they long suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the center ring (Brownmiller 32).

The stories of war rape are similar everywhere, rightly says Brownmiller; two or more men drag a woman and abuse her in the presence of other mute women or vanquished men. In this tale involving borders / borderlines, the Manto story in the beginning acts as a prelude to the actual tale of horrors. When the picture begins, Begum Jaan and her women are already, in Bhabha’s words, “living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender” (Quoted in Smith 249-250). Supraja Mahesh states how “in just five weeks - the fate of millions of people got sealed and this unleashed an epic humanitarian crisis” (Mahesh). Sir Radcliffe’s own decision saddened him too, so much so that he refused his salary of £3000, quite a substantial amount in 1947. Fourteen million people decided to flee across the border when the realization dawned on them that the new Radcliffe line could trap them forever in the ‘wrong’ side. Needless to say, a terrible violence ensued, poignantly portrayed in Rajkahini.

When Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias visit them with the government’s notice, Begum Jaan and the women titter; they first think that the issue is a big joke. To Partha Chatterjee, the “women’s question” was a central issue in nationalist thought and in a chapter titled “The Nation and its Women” he says that, in nineteenth century Bengal “the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from making the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening
up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject. (128-129). But to achieve this ideological strength, formal education became a requirement. Formal education for the new bhadramahila (respectable woman) was thought to make it possible for a woman to acquire not just cultural refinement but also to achieve freedom. Here comes an ironical twist in the plot of Rajkahini. The ‘normal’ always remains an indicator of the hegemonic status of any ideological construct. Begum Jaan’s women are definitely not a part of mainstream society but as the picture progresses, the binaries between the respectable woman and the non-conformist prostitute get blurred. History says that respectable women with education and cultural refinement joined in the struggle for the independence of the land which coincided with the hopes of achieving personal freedom. In Rajkahini, Begum Jaan’s protégées, show traits of a “militant nationalism” trait shared with every citizen of that era, and they begin to earn our respect. Isn’t it ironical that the prostitutes, in spite of their marginalized existence, possess personal freedom which the respectable middle-class women in Bengal and the rest of India were still striving for. In his interview with Anuj Kumar, this is what the director himself specified. As the interview runs:

“When it comes to personal freedom,” Srijit says, “nothing is indispensable.”

“Even if it is a brothel, even if it is not a noble profession that is being practised there, still women have a right to their space, to their bodies and to their will. If they decide against something, you cannot trample over their dreams, their existence. This is the bigger narrative that if you can’t do it there, you can’t do it anywhere” (Kumar).

The prostitutes in Rajkahini possess attributes that the ‘normal’ women i.e. the mothers / sisters / wives / daughters do not possess. They are brazen, without religion, and in the flesh trade — all traits read as promiscuous in patriarchy. As Srijit Mukherji pointed out, “As [Begum Jaan] says, ‘in this kotha, nothing matters apart from money. It is money that homogenises everybody in a brothel. Ironically, this is where these girls get maximum personal freedom’” (Quoted by Kumar).

The women in Rajkahini get entangled in the political violence because they choose not to conform. This piece of land, Begum Jaan’s brothel, a portrayal of miniature India and
this whole issue, this tearing apart of the land can be viewed as an act of violation/rape. To Susan Brownmiller, rape is, “A sexual invasion of the body by force, an incursion into the private, personal inner space without consent—in short, an internal assault from one of several avenues and by one of several methods—constitutes a deliberate violation of emotional, physical and rational integrity and is a hostile, degrading act of violence” (Brownmiller 376). As discussed, the decisions taken by individual men, bodies of men led to dismemberment of people that happened not through choice but by compulsion. I look upon British Imperialism as a violent masculine aggressor or violator that took the nation of India by force. It would be interesting to draw this parallel from Susan Brownmiller:

As interpreted by the loyal philosopher-servants of the Third Reich, fascism’s real nature was an exaggeration of the values that normal society held to be masculine. Goebbels himself had said as much, and before him Nietzsche, that fount of inspiration, had instructed, “Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior.” Therefore, it was not surprising that the ideology of rape burst into perfect flower as Hitler’s armies goosestepped over the face of Europe in the early days of World War II.

Hitler always said that the masses are essentially feminine, and his aggressiveness and charisma elicited an almost masochistic surrender and submission in his audience — a form of psychic rape…. He didn’t convince his audiences; he conquered them.

…The Nazi aim was to conquer, not merely to win and convince, and that, of course, was the heart of the matter. A mind that perceived — and then set about to institutionalize — the masses as weak and feminine, … was a mind that naturally turned to rape as a means of suppression (48-49).

India in 1947 may be looked upon as a woman betrayed by the exploits of colonialism and right wing politicians – the British Government, the Congress, the Muslim League – and by her own fragility and innocence, and if we may add ignorance.

In Rajkahini, both Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias, in spite of the
personal moral horror, allow the violence to continue, much against each one’s own will. Prafulla Mohan Roy in fact refers to Direct Action Day or the Calcutta Killings of 16th August 1946, citing a personal experience of witnessing the rape of a girl known to him. This day was a day of communal riots in the city of Calcutta (Kolkata) and it marked the beginning of The Week of the Long Knives. The massive riots in Calcutta against a backdrop of communal tension led to the loss of more than four thousand lives and rendered about more than a lakh residents homeless. Inevitably, along with the butchering of Hindu men, numerous Hindu women were raped. In Brownmiller’s words:

Apart from a genuine, human concern for wives and daughters, rape by a conqueror is compelling evidence of the conquered’s status of masculine impotence. Defense of women has long been a hallmark of masculine pride, as possession of women has been the hallmark of masculine success. Rape by a conquering soldier destroys all remaining illusions of power and property for men of the defeated side. The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor’s trooping of the colors. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men — vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other (38).

Needless to say, such acts continue to happen as part of natural terror and subjugation by the conqueror. The rape of women remains a constant reminder of the defeat of men and the male anguish that arises out of it.

Partha Chatterjee says that the colonialist critics, speaking of the atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, assumed a “position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (118). Begum Jaan’s women are free yet oppressed and partition gives plundering the perfect backdrop for the plundering of the land and the violation and plundering of unprotected women. Moreover, Begum Jaan’s women do not ‘belong’ to any man, i.e. vis-à-vis love or marriage that allows a man in patriarchy to possess a woman. Susan Brownmiller rightly points out that protection was the sole reason that led to
subjugation of women as marriage puts one woman under the protection of one man against men. She says that for women:

… among those creatures who were her predators, some might serve as her chosen protectors. … Female fear of an open season of rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood or love, was probably the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man, the most important key to her historic dependence, her domestication by protective mating (16).

Sujan in Rajkahini who professes his ‘love’ for Rubina, along with Salim, protects these eleven women as best as they can. Golap falls in love with Master, thinking that he will become her husband-protector. She betrays Begum Jaan, hoping for marriage with Master, only to be sold by one predator, the Master, to another set of predators. The women who remain take military training and decide that they will not give up their domicile. The women of Begum Jaan’s whorehouse are protégées under no man and they decide that they will fight for this piece of “no man’s land”.

Chatterjee says that colonialists rationalized “atrocities [against women] within a complete framework of religious doctrine” (118) and Srijit Mukherji plays deftly with one such doctrine namely satidaha or the immolation of widows. Lata Mani refers to Walter Ewer's letter to the Judicial Department written in November 1818 and says that in Ewer’s view, “when Hindus acted ‘consciously’ they could not, by definition, be acting ‘religiously’. ‘Religious' action is, in this perspective, synonymous with passive, unquestioning obedience” (125). In other words, if the widowed woman is taken to be a victim in the hands of pundits and relatives, she says, “they in turn are seen by Ewer to act in two mutually exclusive ways: either ‘consciously,’ that is, ‘irreligiously,’ or ‘passively,’ that is, ‘religiously’” (125). He in fact stresses on the will of the widowed woman, and Mani reminds us that “given the widow's ignorance and weak mental and physical capacity, it took little persuasion to turn any apprehension into a reluctant consent” (125-126). In the context of Mukherji’s Rajkahini, we may very well think of the independent woman or the free woman (i.e. a woman without male protection) in the widow’s stead. Ewer’s stressing on the
'will' of the widow brings in the question of consent on the part of the woman. A good sati was one who stayed true to the dictum of the scriptures. This in fact led to a regulation in 1813, says Mani, “which defined sati as legal providing it met certain criteria, chief among which was that it be a voluntary act” (126). Mani in fact goes on to mention that colonial officials always viewed native women “as subjected, whether they were coerced or apparently willing to jump into the flames” (129). It may sound strange but Parliamentary Papers testify that several women resisted attempts to prevent their immolation, sometimes going to the extent of threatening relatives seeking to detain them. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak succinctly put it, “Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted to die’” (297). Annual reports of sati however suggest otherwise, validating not the resistance of women but the barbarity of men, and patriarchy, in their coercion. Mani rightly states:

The widow thus nowhere appears as a subject. If she resisted, she was seen to be dominated by hindu men. If she conceded, she was considered victimized by religion. Despite the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of "willing" sati, given the absence of women's voices and the historical and cultural variability of such terms as "agency" and "subjecthood," it seems to me that the volition of some widows can justifiably be seen as equal to the resistance of others. Official response to this contradictory evidence, however, was typically to simplify it (129).

Far from being weak mentally or physically, Begum Jaan and her women refuse to be puppets or objects in the hands of patriarchy, in the shape of rulers and bureaucrats. The first thing that Begum Jaan does is appeal to the Nawab of Rangpur to save them from eviction. Though very much a part of the patriarchal set up, the Nawab after a visit to Delhi for a meeting arranged for rulers of Princely States, understands that he has been rendered powerless by the Colonial rulers and confesses the same to Begum Jaan, insisting that she make peace with the rulers by complying with their wishes. Begum Jaan dismisses him as she would dismiss any commoner and she with her girl-gang decides to fight against the oppressors. Analyzing the issue of withholding "subjecthood" from women, Lata Mani protests, “Women were cast as either pathetic or heroic victims. The former were portrayed
as beaten down, manipulated, and coerced, the latter as selflessly entering the raging flames oblivious to any physical pain. Superslave or superhuman, women in this discourse remain eternal victims” (129-130).

Begum Jaan and her women can be put under neither of these two categories. They attain ‘agency’ and ‘subjecthood’, refusing to be victimized, through their deeds which are akin to that of the sati. To Spivak, sati is widow sacrifice. She explains, “The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it as suttee.) The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class fixed” (297). Viewing the actions of Begum Jaan and her women it could very well be claimed that as agents and subjects, they decide on fighting and sacrificing themselves voluntarily instead of being objectified as victims. In fact, Spivak refers to certain ‘sanctioned suicides’ as mentioned in the Dharmasasstra. The first that she mentions is “atmaghata (a killing of the self)” (299) and the second is “atmadana” (299) or self-sacrifice. A very good example of the grief-stricken widow committing an act of atmaghata would be Pandu’s wife Madri in the Mahabharata. In both atmaghata and atmadana, the root word is atma or the self. One does not need to glorify the act of sati, but one must concede the actions of the woman as a subject who voluntarily kills or sacrifices herself, whatever may be the cause. In fact, Gayatri Spivak also opines that “sati should have been read with martyrdom” (302) and if being a sati is synonymous with martyrdom, then Begum Jaan’s women are satis and martyrs indeed.

The ending of the film explains why it has been titled Rajkahini. Abanindranath Tagore’s Rajkahini documents a series of tales dealing with the gallantry of the Rajput kings and queens — Shiladitya, Goha, Bappaditya, Padmini, Hambir, Chanda, Rana Kumbha and SangramSingh. Mukherji’s Rajkahini ends with the women requesting Thamma to read Padmini’s tale from Abanindranath Tagore’s Rajkahini. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to Jauhar as an act of resistance and defiance and a celebration of subjecthood. Spivak writes:

In a further twist of the paradox, this emphasis on free will establishes the peculiar misfortune of holding a female body. … “The Jauhar [group
self-immolation of aristocratic Rajput war-widows or imminent war-widows practiced by the Rajput ladies of Chitor and other places for saving themselves from unspeakable atrocities at the hands of the victorious Moslems are too well known to need any lengthy notice” (HD II.2, 629). Although jauhar is not, strictly speaking, an act of sati, and although I do not wish to speak for the sanctioned sexual violence of conquering male armies, "Moslem" or otherwise, female self-immolation in the face of it is a legitimation of rape as "natural" and works, in the long run, in the interest of unique genital possession of the female. The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition (303).

Indeed, as Susan Browmiller too reminds us, if there is raping done during war, it is invariably viewed as an act of the conqueror on the bodies of the women of the defeated enemy’s side. Viewed from this perspective, Srijit Mukherji’s Rajkahini then becomes a study of free will and subjecthood. As Mukherji himself states in an interview, “It is very individualistic, very personal freedom oriented as opposed to political independence. It is more like a subaltern discourse from the perspective of people who were never really taken into account. They were never really stakeholders” (Kumar). Rajkahini ends with the Thamma reading aloud the section in “Padmini” which glorifies the voluntary act of mass immolation. Tagore writes: “Rani Padmini jumped into the well of fire with twelve thousand Rajput women – all beautiful faces of Chitor with their sweet words and sweet smiles turned into ashes within a moment. A cry rose from the breasts of all Rajputs — “Hail o great Satis” [translation mine] (Tagore 82). The act of jauhar thus becomes a heroic act of resistance against the patriarchal invader. Sati here acquires a new meaning. The sati here emerges not as a woman who has cohabited with one man, always the husband in a hetero-normative patriarchal setup, but one who acquires and retains possession of her own body and self and voluntarily annihilates the body to retain her sense of selfhood.

As the credits roll at the end, the full National Anthem written by Rabindranath Tagore plays in the background. “Bharat Bhagya Vidhata” loosely translated as “One who decides the destiny of Bharat” acquires an ironic meaning considering the role of the British patriarchs in partitioning India. The men acquiesce but Begum Jaan’s women, much like the
Rajput women, stripped of home and nationality, are destroyed in body but remain undefeated in spirit.

References


Renan, Ernest.“What is a Nation?” (Translated by Martin Thom). Nation and Narration. Edited by Homi Bhabha, Routledge, First Indian Reprint 2008, pp. 8-22.

Roy, Rituparna. South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khuswant Singh to Amitav


Bionote: Dr. Tania Chakraverty is currently the Dean of Students Welfare, Diamond Harbour Women’s University, Calcutta. She completed her Ph.D. on "Gender Representations in the Fiction of Ernest Hemingway" from Calcutta University under the supervision of Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta. She has taught undergraduate and postgraduate students at Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata, and served as Guest Faculty in the Post-Graduate Department of English at Calcutta University (2009-2016) and at the Sanskrit College and University (2019). In 2010, Chakraverty participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) in the U.S., focusing on "Strengthening and Widening the Scope of American Studies: The U.S. Experience." She has authored "Ernest Hemingway and the Fluidity of Gender: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Selected Works" (Routledge International, 2022) and co-authored "Rhapsodies and Musings" (Hawakal, 2015). She translated the 1967 Sahitya Award-winning play "Tapasvi O Taranginee" by Buddhadev Basu and the 1988 Sahitya Award-winning novel "Badi Bodle Jay" by Ramapada Chowdhury.
Battling Binaries: The Psychosocial Endurance of Gender Constructs in West Asian War Fiction

Manisha Bhadran
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad
Mail ID: manisha.rbhadran@gmail.com

Abstract: The archetypes of the heroic soldier and the caring mother, which dominate the social imaginary of war, reflect the essentially gendered nature of war discourse. However, violent masculinity and gentle femininity, though essential to the war discourse, are not biological qualities but cultural constructions. The hegemonic “war story,” as Miriam Cooke refers to it, is built on these binaries of masculinity/femininity, civilian/combatant, home/front, etc. However, in postcolonial wars, these binaries are complicated by both the inclusion of women as combatants and the technological advancements that enable the pervasion of war into homes, endangering civilians just as much as combatants. In this article, I will examine how select contemporary West Asian fictional narratives depict the war experience of gendered subjects in occupied or war-torn territories like Iraq and Palestine. Exploring these texts in the light of war studies conducted by Miriam Cooke and Joshua S. Goldstein reveals that, despite the changing face of the new wars and the subversion of gender binaries, psycho-social impacts of conventional gender roles persist. Men depicted in the selected fictional texts continue to bear the pressure to protect and to resist violence using violence. Women’s changing roles in the new wars expose them to similar violence as combatants, but the lack of social recognition metes out a double jeopardy, whereby they are survivors of war’s violence yet are denied the honour or aftercare received by male combatants of war.

Keywords: War, Gender, Civilian / Combatant, Home / Front, West Asia
The archetypes of the heroic soldier and the caring mother, which conventionally dominate the cultural narratives on war, exemplify the essentially gendered nature of war discourse. War is the most gender-segregated activity after the biological process of reproduction (Cooke and Woollacott ix). Joshua S. Goldstein, in his work titled War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa, observes that, notwithstanding the myth of female Amazonian warriors and the rise of female enlistment in some militaries, the connection between war and gender is stable across cultures and through time: men form the bulk of the combatants while women perform varying roles as civilians (Goldstein 9).

The near-universal gender segregation in war, however, does not emanate from an inherent propensity for aggression in males and peaceful co-existence in females. Goldstein, through extensive analysis, ascribes the gendered structure of war partly to the biological differences of size and strength and, more importantly, to the cultural meanings ascribed to masculinity and femininity (406). As Laura Sjoberg writes:

...(M)embership in a biological sex category brings with it a host of social characteristics, constraints and meanings beyond the physical composition of the sexed body… [including] expectations about how people act, what jobs they will hold, what activities they can participate in, what resources they have access to and what roles they will play in war and conflict. (175)

The characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity—such as toughness and bravery for men and gentleness and peacefulness for women—are not inherent qualities but rather are culturally constructed. The construction of masculinity in war requires, as its Other, the idea of femininity (Enloe xiii). Miriam Cooke, in Women and the War Story, elaborates on this construction of masculinity in opposition to femininity when she writes, “… (I)t is not that men are [biologically] aggressive, courageous, and heroic… but rather that, if they wish to be clear about an identity that will distance them from the dreaded feminine, they must strive to be aggressive, courageous, and heroic” (295).

The hegemonic and conventional “war story”, as Cooke refers to it, is built on these binaries of masculinity/femininity, civilian/combatant, home/front, etc. However, in the “postcolonial wars” (Cooke 293) or “new wars” (Chinkin and Kaldor 167), these binaries are complicated by both the inclusion of women as combatants and the technological advancements that enable the pervasion of war into homes, endangering civilians just as
much as combatants. While, formerly, women’s role was confined to that of the Other, in postcolonial wars, women are combatants, targets, survivors, etc. (Cooke 295).

In these new wars, with the subversion of such dyadic constructions, including masculine and feminine war roles, do the gender identities of individuals continue to inform their individual war stories? In this article, I will examine how contemporary West Asian war fiction depicts the war experience of gendered subjects in occupied or war-torn territories. How is the war story of a character shaped by the constructed meanings of masculinity and femininity? How do these meanings also shape their responses to the conditions of war? How does the breakdown of the everyday code of gendered conduct during war, as depicted in fiction, alter the existing constructions of masculinity and femininity? This article will attempt to answer these questions through a reading of the depiction of war and gender in novels like *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra and *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa.

*The Sirens in Baghdad*, set in the context of the United States’ occupation of Iraq in 2003, portrays a young unnamed Iraqi man’s transformation from a timid student to a radical insurgent following the humiliation faced by his family at the hands of the invading soldiers. *Mornings in Jenin* follows the Abulheja family over four generations, tracing their eviction from Palestine in 1948 and the subsequent violence experienced as refugees. Both the novels capture the physical and psychological violence experienced in the backdrop of conflict and occupation in West Asia.

Armed resistance or participation in war has historically largely been a man’s domain. Novels like *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Sirens of Baghdad* present an exclusively male population taking part in armed resistance and suffering its violence. Goldstein comments: “(C)ultures mo[u]ld males into warriors by attaching to “manhood” or “masculinity” those qualities that make good warriors” (252). He adds: “Culture after culture features rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. Only select men can achieve “manhood,” and it must be won individually… (T)he passages to manhood are surprisingly similar across cultures in terms of passing harsh tests bravely” (264). In the case of male children growing up in occupied Palestine in *Mornings in Jenin*, braving Israeli tanks and bullets by hurling stones at them is a rite they participate in. Abulhawa writes:
But they threw rocks at Israeli tanks anyway, because boys will be boys and the young shall never respect the fragile breath holding them to life. They did it not for the sake of freedom, for such a concept was too precarious. They did it out of peer pressure, for the nature of small boys that attracts them to the adventures and trials of men.

(199) The boys’ participation in acts of violence not only marks their attraction to the adventures of men, as Abulhawa describes it, but also becomes part of their accession to manhood. Zorica Mrsevic argues that such encouragement of acts of “aggressive masculinity” in boys in patriarchal societies makes it easier for them to transition to perpetrators of violence, whether within or outside the context of war (44).

In societies where participation in violent forms of resistance is the test of manhood, failing to participate causes social disapprobation. “Shame is the glue that holds the man-making process together,” observes Goldstein (269). The process of shaming men who fail to meet the expectations associated with masculinity includes the derogatory use of words like “sissy” and “faggot.” Thus, masculinity is not constructed solely in opposition to femininity, but it is also a heterosexual masculinity set in opposition to the homosexual man. Khadra presents as a case in point Omar the Corporal who is shamed for his dual failure to meet the demands of masculinity – by deserting the resistance movement as well as by being a homosexual. Omar serves the Iraqi military as a cook, but the unit which he was a part of deserts in fear of the approaching US troops. Omar is described as a man who “drown(s) his grief and shame in adulterated wine… [having] lost his self-respect” (Khadra 39). Omar is hated by most of the village. His shame becomes complete when he is discovered to be a homosexual, inviting further ridicule from the heteronormative society.

Cooke observes that, in postcolonial wars, technological advancements facilitate the entry of war into the home front. Although in violation of international humanitarian laws, these new wars endanger the civilian as well as the combatant (Chinkin and Kaldor 181). When civilians, including female civilians, become embroiled in war just as much as the male combatants, the conventional gendered roles of man as protector and woman as protected are complicated. As women’s role in the war shifts from that of the Other – the archetypal mother who is away from the war zone – into that of equal partners of men in the war experience, the
myth of the archetypal heroic soldier also gets shaken. These archetypes and gender roles are problematized leading to a crisis of gender. Cooke writes:

Postcolonial war space holds increasing numbers of women, as targets of bombs and rapes, as guerrillas, as subjects of debates about the gendering of the military, of combat and of war stories… Their embodied presence complicates the persistence of masculinity-reinforcing speech and behavio(u)rs. As women are compelled to experience war more or less equally with men… [this makes] a mockery of such notions as Defender and Defended. (Cooke, Women and the War Story 132)

In other words, as women take up more conventionally masculine roles, the conventional masculine roles are brought to question, engendering a crisis of masculinity. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will examine how the masculine role of defender is depicted in West Asian war fiction – whether it is threatened by the equal participation of women in war or whether the psychosocial pressures of masculinity persist even in the new wars.

Hasan and Dalia in Mornings in Jenin are parents to two boys at the time of their forced eviction from their land by the Israeli army, during which the younger of the boys, Ismael, is stolen by a childless Israeli soldier. While Dalia is consumed by agony, Hasan is haunted by inadequacy. Abulhawa writes: “But not even sleep could assuage the inadequacy he [Hasan] felt. He had failed to protect his family. He could not provide assurance, nor could he bring Ismael back” (33). Although it was from Dalia’s arms that Ismael was wrenched away by the soldier, the guilt for the inability to protect Ismael is borne by Hasan, for it is the culturally ascribed role of a man to protect the women and children in his family. Contrary to Cooke’s argument that the equal and embodied presence of women shouldering war’s horrors with men causes men to question their conventional role as “defender”, it may be observed that, in Hasan’s case, the psychosocial pressures to protect persist. The crisis of masculinity engendered here is not from a problematization of gendered dyads owing to the presence of women, as proposed by Cooke, but from the inability to uphold his conventional role as man, an idea which persists in spite of women sharing in the war experience. Even the shared experience of a traumatic incident such as the loss of a son is, as seen, gendered and different for both the parents.
Before Hasan’s death, he entrusts his older son Yousef with the responsibility of taking care of Amal, his sister, who was born in the refugee camp. In the throes of Israeli occupation, Yousef laments his inability to shoulder the responsibility. He writes to Amal:

…Baba made me promise to take care of you if anything ever happened to him.

… I don’t know how to keep my promise to him. If I stay here, these Israelis will eventually kill me.

…

It breaks my heart that I cannot make for you the life Baba wanted us to have.

(Abulhawa 99)

That Yousef’s torment and guilt emanate from the responsibility to take care of his family bequeathed to him as a man makes it a quintessentially gendered experience.

The Sirens of Baghdad also presents evidence of the psychological pressure on men to defend their families from the precarity engendered by occupation, war and genocide. When the occupying American forces barge into the protagonist’s house, the protagonist unwittingly witnesses the nudity of his father. The protagonist says: “I found myself hating my arms, which seemed grotesque, translucent, ugly, the symbols of my impotence; hating my eyes, which refused to turn away and pleaded for blindness; hating my mother’s screams, which discredited me” (Khadra 102, emphasis added). The word “impotence” is an indication of the affront to his masculinity caused by the dishonour of his family to which he is a powerless witness.

Owing to the hierarchy and reverence embedded in the structure of the Bedouin society, the father realizes the impact of his own humiliation on the son. The protagonist says: “At that very instant, we [the father and the protagonist] already knew that we were looking at each other for the last time,” evidencing that the father instantly recognizes his son’s need to avenge his dishonour (Khadra 102). Similarly, the protagonist’s sister Bahia also accepts his sense of responsibility to uphold the honour of the family and does not dissuade him from leaving to join the resistance. He says, “Bahia was a daughter of her tribe. In the ancestral tradition, hono(u)r was supposed to be the domain of men, but even so, she knew how to recognize it and require it” (Khadra 108). The existing patriarchal familial structure of occupied societies, along with its gender roles and the meanings ascribed to gendered entities,
therefore affects the very experience of violence and violations and bequeath the responsibility for retaliation to men. Discussing the changing role of women in the new wars, Cooke says:

In nuclear age wars the women and the children—whom the [hegemonic] War Story had described as at home and safe because defended by their men at the front—are increasingly acknowledged to be attractive military targets. They are not being protected. Their men cannot protect them. (*Women and the War Story* 38)

Although the male characters depicted in West Asian war fiction continue to bear the pressure to uphold the traditional role of the defender, they find themselves unable to protect their families once the war infiltrates their homes. Contrary to theorists’ claims that men in new wars are unsure of their roles, the novels depict a different experience. These men face a double bind: they continue to believe it is their duty to protect, yet they are unable to do so when the war reaches their homes, engendering the crisis of masculinity as discussed.

The female characters in the war zone are shown to evolve from the conventional role of the defended to take up the challenges posed by the new wars that invade their spaces. In *Mornings in Jenin*, there is a visible difference in the role of women in the presence of menfolk and in their absence during war. During the early years of Israeli occupation, when the refugee camps are marked by relative peace as they lie in wait for international deliberations, the woman’s role is largely conventional and gendered. Virginia Woolf’s observation that men fought the world’s battles and brought home victories and accomplishments while women have “borne and bred and washed and taught” is underscored here (*Woolf* 121). Hanna Diamond, in her study of gender roles during the Second World War, quotes one of her interviewees who said:

In my parents’ house my father was an official Communist Resistance worker. …But it cannot be said that my mother was not involved in Resistance activities. Who used to get up in the morning to take care of the Resistance worker who was to leave before sunrise? Who used to darn socks and do the washing for the Resistance worker who was sleeping? … And who would be at home when the police called during an alert? I think my mother was as involved in Resistance activities as my father. (qtd. in Diamond 98)
Abulhawa, in *Mornings in Jenin*, portrays how the women scrub and clean so that the men may make history. Yehya, the patriarch of the Abulheja family, ousted from their ancestral home and condemned to live in the refugee camps, decides to embark on a defiant journey to set foot on his land that he has been exiled from. Before the journey, he requests his daughter-in-law to whiten his clothes for him:

One early November morning in 1953, he handed some clothes to Dalia.

“*Ya binti* [“my daughter”].” Yehya said, “will you make these as white as they can be?”

Dalia took the clothes and pushed them in the soapy water. Leaning into the wash bucket to scrub, she lifted her head, a few strands of hair escaping from her scarf, and watched her father-in-law walk away. (Abulhawa 39)

Wearing the clothes scrubbed clean by Dalia, Yehya defies fear and the armed Israeli soldiers, makes a victorious journey to his land and his home, and returns a hero with olives from his orchards. Here, the act of resistance, the making of history, is the task of the man, while the woman, as Woolf states, simply facilitates the same. However, in the absence of the woman who cooks, cleans and takes care of the young ones, men’s acts of resistance would be weighed down by the hurdles of household chores.

If, as Cooke argues, women are claiming their right to describe the variety of roles they have donned during war as “combat,” can Dalia’s scrubbing of Yehya’s clothes for his defiant journey be a mark of her resistance against Israeli occupation? Cooke’s argument is mirrored in Abulhawa’s description of Dalia as “a stout woman, imposing and severe, who *soldiered* all day at cleaning, cooking, baking, and embroidering thobes” (Abulhawa 49, emphasis added). While examining Dalia’s spirit of anti-colonial resistance and her contribution to the resistance movement in invisible ways, it must also be observed that she was confined by the modes of conduct prescribed for women by the Palestinian society, which prevented her from engaging in a socially visible form of resistance.

In the absence of men, however, the role played by women like Dalia stretches far beyond household chores. As Beverly Allen observes in the context of the then-ongoing Bosnian war: “The war is providing occasions for increased numbers of women to take on more traditionally masculine roles…” (27). In *Mornings in Jenin*, when the men in Dalia’s family arm themselves and set out to engage in combat with the Israeli forces, the women
who are left behind must make strategic moves to defend themselves and their children. The first time this happens, Abulhawa says: “Mama [Dalia], an experienced victim of war, is gathering supplies and mapping out hiding places with other women” (83). Dalia guides her daughter Amal and her friend Huda into a hole in the kitchen floor and covers them with a lid to protect them from the incessant bombing (Abulhawa 58). After the war, Amal says:

Mama’s bravery during the war would later be invoked as the essence of a fellaha’s [“peasant woman’s”] fortitude. She refused to flee… Everyone agreed that when it mattered, she showed herself to be truly courageous. “A lot of us just talked big, but we ran for our lives while Um Yousef [Dalia] was true to her word. She said she would not let the Jews take away the only home her daughter knew,” is what people said about Mama after the war.

Mama had stayed for me…

… I saw her as the woman who had risked her life to protect me from what she had once endured. (Abulhawa 72, emphasis added)

When read in the light of Cooke’s rejection of the binaries of home and the front, civilian and combatant, and men’s and women’s spaces, this episode of Dalia’s bravery exemplifies such a blurring of boundaries. Bombs rain on civilian housing areas, bringing the war front to the home, and female civilians like Dalia exude a male combatant’s celebrated qualities of courage, fortitude, proactivity and a commitment to protect one’s dependents at the cost of his own life. Even in her non-violent resistance and resilience, the female civilian adopts the characteristics of a conventionally male combatant.

In the case of Dalia, the trauma she undergoes through the days of shelling in and around the refugee camp is akin to the shell shock commonly experienced by combatants on the war front. Towards the end of the war, when Amal climbs out of the hole in the kitchen, she says: “I saw Mama [Dalia]. She was sitting on the ground, her eyes distant and uninhabited. She seemed not to notice when soldiers pulled up in their trucks” (Abulhawa 71). Soon after, Dalia and the children are taken to a treatment tent, where, Amal says:

She [Dalia] sat motionless in a corner, just as I had seen her sitting on the ground when I had stood up in the kitchen hole. I stopped. Her spacious empty eyes did not see me standing before her. She seemed to see nothing.
“Mama.” I touched her lightly, but she did not respond. I put my face in front of hers, but her eyes looked through me. (Abulhawa 73)

Dalia’s blank, unfocussed, and unseeing gaze can be equated with “the thousand yard stare” characteristic of combatants in shell shock, a form of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by war. She soon descends irrecoverably into the abyss of her own mind and remains a shadow of herself until her release in the form of death. Dalia’s experience of and participation in war from within the four walls of her home is, therefore, in spirit and in impact, similar to that of a combatant on the battlefield.

Another example of gendered trauma in Mornings in Jenin can be found in separate incidents involving two gunshots, one that hits Amal as she runs homeward through occupied Palestine and the other that hits Yousef as he tries to rescue a wounded comrade while taking part in armed resistance against the Israeli army. While both their experiences are part of the extreme corporeal vulnerability caused by occupation and war, respectively, participation in war is an act that willfully heightens that vulnerability for a political cause and Yousef is hailed as a hero for the same. Amal says: “That story, witnessed by Yousef ’s subsequent limp, became legend in Jenin, where I was still recovering from my own bullet wound” (Abulhawa 101). No heroic value is ascribed to the wounds that Amal bears on her body as a non-combatant. After the incident, Amal loses confidence in herself owing to the scars and disfiguration caused by the bullet injury. Amal says:

I was closing in on fourteen with a disfigured body…

… At night, for self punishment and to sustain the momentum of my scholastic solitude, I fingered the rutted flesh of my abdomen, a reminder that I was damaged goods no boy would want. (Abulhawa 104)

In spite of women’s direct involvement in wars, the mapping of escape routes, the experience of shell-shock and bullet injuries, their status is not acknowledged as similar to combatants. Mickiela Montoya, a female US war veteran, says: “I was in Iraq getting bombed and shot at, but people won’t even listen when I say I was at war because I’m a female” (qtd. in Benedict). In the above examples, the lack of recognition of women as even survivors of the first-hand violence of war condemns Dalia and Amal to further suffering. Dalia receives no medical attention for shell-shock and continues to wither away until her death, as she is not
recognized as a survivor of war. Amal believes her bullet wounds render her unwanted as, unlike the injuries of men, her scars are not celebrated as trophies of her bravery. Even in the new wars, with the blurring of binaries like combatant/civilian, home/front, etc., the privileging of the discourse of “men as warrior” (Ryan 5) persists and women’s experiences of war lack adequate recognition. This leads to women being doubly oppressed – by the violence of war borne on their bodies as bullet wounds and shell shocks, and also by the ensuing lack of recognition and attention as survivors of the violence of war.

In spite of the changing face of the new wars, psycho-social impacts of conventional gender roles persist. Men depicted in the selected fictional texts continue to bear the pressure to protect, to uphold the honour of their families, and to resist violence using violence. Women’s changing roles in the new wars expose them to similar violence as male combatants, but the lack of social recognition causes a form of double jeopardy, whereby women are survivors of violence yet are denied the honour or aftercare received by male survivors of war.

References


**Bionote:** Manisha Bhadran is a Ph.D. student at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, studying human rights questions in contemporary West Asian war fiction. Previously, she worked as Assistant Professor of English at Rajagiri School of Engineering and Technology, Kochi. She completed her postgraduate studies at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, and also earned an MPhil for her research on gendered bodies and the Indian Penal Code. She has presented her research findings at institutes of international repute including the University of Oxford and the University of George Washington. Her research interests include women’s studies, human rights, and Indian criminal law.
Exploring the Division of Labour in the Family: Insights from Women in the Service Sector in Darjeeling Town

Ritu Mangar
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Centre for Himalayan Studies
University of North Bengal
Darjeeling
Mail ID: ritika_mangar@yahoo.com

Abstract: The colonial history of Darjeeling Hills had a considerable influence on the development and settlement of Darjeeling Town, notably in terms of women's contexts such as migration, forms of economic engagement for women, and the introduction of formal education for women, among other aspects. When we look into the region's history, we find that women have worked in a number of occupations, although primarily in informal work, and they have contributed to the region's economy and gradual societal changes in their own capacities. Despite the fact that women have long worked in public spaces in the hills of Darjeeling, the prevalent traditional norm in the region recognizes the home as a woman's primary space. Even while women in the hills may have substantially distinct socioeconomic backgrounds, they are nevertheless subjected to some dominant gender norms. Women who work outside have the obligation to divide their time between paid and unpaid domestic work, since parenting and domestic tasks have always been considered as women's work in the hills, whether in towns or in villages. Among the various challenges and debates surrounding 'working women,' one key question that arises is the link between women's participation in paid work and the gendered distribution of labour in the household. As a result, this article seeks to understand the division of labour, one component of the larger 'working women's question,' in families of women employed in the service sector. As such, in-depth perspectives of ten married women who represent a segment of this social group in the Town of Darjeeling have been analysed.

Keywords: Working Women, Service Sector, Division of Labour, Married Women, Darjeeling Town
Introduction

Questions surrounding the idea of “working women” range from those pertaining to autonomy, equality, and empowerment to those involving time constraints, role conflicts and access to public spaces. However, it is not true that only women who work in paid employment are working; rather, as the headline of an article on International Women’s Day published on the website “Kashmir Reader” asserts, “...There is no such thing as a ‘non-working’ woman.” This concern serves as a powerful reminder that using the term “working women” to refer only to a specific group of women whose work includes paid labour would be unfair to the rest of the women who work in unpaid domestic labour within their households. Rather, it should be an all-in-category for the various forms of labour that women undertake both inside and outside the households. Although women have always been at work, the value attributed to their work and workplace has historically been defined by socio-economic and political factors. As such, their involvement in unpaid work is usually ignored and their participation in paid work outside the households is mostly both undervalued and underpaid. As a result, the term's exclusivity to any single group of women is called into question as women are always at work. Therefore in light of this observation, women who work for pay outside the households while still performing unpaid domestic tasks are included in the term "working women" in this article, without excluding any women from the working category.

In addition to the aforementioned issues surrounding working women, the question is further expanded when the element of marriage is added to it. The marital dyad naturally undergoes changes and adaptations with marriage, especially as it is the woman who has to make the most adjustments. Consequently, for women, marriage paired with paid work adds additional layers of complexity to the process. The variable ‘married working woman’ encompasses several additional aspects that deepen and broaden the issue, including the need to balance work and family obligations, the rise in expectations and accountability, and many more. Therefore, understanding gender relations in everyday life becomes more intricate when viewed through the perspective of married working women.

One way of understanding gender relations in everyday life involves looking at the family unit. In fact, a key concern that arises with respect to "working women" is how women's participation in paid work relates to gendered power dynamics inside their own
families. Family relationships have been considered by feminist researchers as cultures where
gender is symbolically produced through everyday interactions. They have focused on the
diversity and complexity of family as their starting point, by emphasizing how power infuses
all sites of family relationships (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). The primary socialization of
gender values begins from the family and ideas of what is expected of men and women by the
society are significantly developed within it. As a result, such ideals influence gender
relations, which in turn reinforce gendered power dynamics in many ways. Women's
positions of economic independence are therefore one aspect that might be anticipated to
impact these gender relations and power dynamics in the household.

Thus it is within the interplay of all these factors that gender relations and power
dynamics within the family of married working women is situated. Amongst the above
discussed challenges and debates surrounding ‘working women’, this article seeks to
understand the aspect of division of labour in the family. In the family of working women
who are married, the division of labour based on gender remains a prominent aspect. The
division of labour in the family unit naturally shifts and reallocates when married women
leave the house to work, which makes it an essential component of the broader ‘working
women's question.’

The main focus of the article is exploring the division of labour in the family through
the personal narratives of these women. Thus, the aim of the paper will be fulfilled through
the insights of women engaged in the service sector in Darjeeling Town. In-depth
perspectives of ten married women who represent a segment of this group in the town of
Darjeeling will be looked into. The representation relies on the insights of women belonging
to the Nepali community, between the age group of 40-55, who are employed as teachers,
nursing staff and administrative staff in the town of Darjeeling. The respondents have been
identified with the help of purposive and stratified sampling techniques. Personal observation
forms a key part in the description of accounts throughout this article. In addition to the
primary data consisting of women’s accounts, secondary data sources have been gathered
from existing literature related to the topic.

A Brief Colonial Background of Darjeeling Town with a Focus on Women’s Contexts

In 1835, the area of Darjeeling which was formerly part of the dominion of Raja of
Sikkim came under British control by a Deed of Grant. The British were drawn by the
station’s potential as a sanatorium as well as its advantages as a centre that would encompass all of the country’s trade and as a position of immense strategic importance (Dozey, 1917). Subsequently, it was developed into a hill station due to its definition as a health resort and the establishment of tea plantations by British colonisers. During the British annexation, the area had only a small population. However, in the subsequent decades, the number of people increased significantly due to the arrival of a substantial population from mostly nearby Himalayan regions and also from the plains of mainland India. As a result, the region formed a multi-ethnic and multilingual populace, with the majority identifying as the Nepali community and, subsequently the Nepali language emerged as the lingua franca in the region. This population growth was facilitated by the cultivation of tea, the establishment of military recruitment centre, and the availability of opportunities for mountaineering work and small-scale businesses. In order to address the demand for labour in the plantation industry, the British colonists actively encouraged the recruitment of family labour, particularly from the neighbouring state of Nepal. This approach substantially contributed to the migration of women as well. In course of time, women became the majority of the labour force in the plantation industry in Darjeeling hills, mostly working in the fields. Apart from their employment on plantations, women also had many informal roles in the colonial economy. They managed small shops and businesses in the town as well as worked as porters, construction workers, and domestic helpers.

By the late nineteenth century, Darjeeling had developed into an urban centre, characterised by the presence of modern amenities and a growing population. The amenities also included the establishment of schools. Initially, Roman Catholic Missionaries set up schools for the children of European families residing in the region. Later, the Church of Scotland Mission established schools to cater to the educational requirements of the native population in the hills. Despite facing challenges concerning gender ideology, burden of domestic work, economic obligations, and fear of conversion, women in the hills made significant progress in education (Pradhan and Pain, 2020). Although the introduction of education for women was delayed, there were some individuals who displayed great enthusiasm and took significant steps towards learning and improving their lives. The exposure to formal education resulted in chances for women to choose occupations other than informal labour. The phenomenon has continued up to the present time, with women,
although facing limited economic opportunities, gradually entering the service sector, albeit in smaller numbers than men folk.

The colonial history of Darjeeling therefore had a considerable influence on the development and settlement of Darjeeling town, notably in terms of women’s contexts such as migration, forms of economic engagement of women, and the introduction of formal education for women, among other aspects. Thus, when we look into the region’s history, we find that women have worked in a number of occupations, although primarily in informal work, and they have contributed to the region’s economy and gradual societal changes in their own capacities.

**Working Women and the Division of Labour in the Family in Darjeeling Town**

As has been pointed out, women who have had access to formal education have been able to find employment in the service sector, primarily in towns where most of the service-related sectors are located. Despite the relatively limited chances or choices compared to larger towns and cities in the country, women have been mostly and traditionally concentrated in sectors such as education, health, administration and tourism. Furthermore, it is obvious that women's aspirations to engage in employment have been modestly increasing over time in the hills, despite the scarcity of available opportunities. Even so, a woman's ability to participate in public spaces of work is not solely determined by her personal aspirations. This is particularly true in a patriarchal society like India, where the honour and dignity of both the family and the community rest upon women’s shoulders, as a result, women's mobility and access to certain public spaces are regulated, restricted and influenced by gender norms (Siwach, 2020). Thus, even though women in Darjeeling's hill society have always been present in public spaces of work in various capacities beyond their domestic spheres, it is to be remembered that their participation remains marked by the ideology of gendered roles, regulation, and constant scrutiny regarding the nature of the work they undertake.

When this prevalent traditional belief in gender roles acknowledges the home as the primary sphere for women, a significant change occurs in their role performances when they begin working for paid work. This necessitates the reorganisation of family routines and the allocation of time, workload and responsibility, among other things. Women who work outside, have the obligation to divide their time between paid and unpaid domestic work,
since parenting and domestic tasks have always been considered as women’s work in the hills, whether in towns or villages. Although opportunities for employment on equal terms and conditions to that of men are opening up for women yet it does not release them from their culturally imposed role of homemaking. Studies have shown that women workers are constrained by the dominant social and cultural norms of the society. This phenomenon has been discussed by Hochschild’s (1989) in the work “The Second Shift” where she investigates the double burden experienced by working women.

In her book, she asserts that in families where both spouses work, upon returning home from work, the woman is tasked with an additional set of duties, referred to as the ‘second shift’. This emphasizes how the ideology of gendered roles assigns domestic duties mostly to women. She has noted that the majority of women engage in one shift at their workplace and an additional ‘second shift’ at their home, which includes child-care responsibilities. This maternal role of childcare and spousal role of domestic work has also, always been considered primary areas of responsibilities for women in Darjeeling’s society. With the rise of dual-earner families women’s status has been changing over the past few decades but although their status has been changing, their domestic workload hasn’t. This observation has been validated when the respondents shared their everyday routines during the conducted interviews. The women stated that they had to get up hours early before work in order to fulfil their domestic responsibilities, which mostly involved cooking for the entire family, alongside having to ensure they arrived to work on time. In addition, they would return home and do the remaining tasks, with some of them even preparing for the next day. The weekends too, did not seem to be a day-off of work, the piled up household work throughout the weekdays were to be completed during these days.

Seema, a 52-year-old Assistant Professor, shares her experience of pursuing her Ph.D. degree while working alongside her husband at a government college in Darjeeling town. She emphasises the physical and mental resilience she found during that period. After returning from work, she would quickly prepare dinner and then dedicate the rest of the night to her research, finding a quiet room to read after everyone had gone to bed. On the following day, she would awaken and hastily prepare meals for the day and run to work, causing her neighbours to identify her as 'the woman who runs down the hill every morning'. Despite consistently following the same routine over the years, she does not perceive it as a burden.
On the contrary, she believes it enhances women's mental strength and fosters their determination to fulfil our aspirations no matter what.

Another instance involves Rita, a 55-year-old woman employed as a teacher at a private educational institution in the town. She recounts her experience of initially residing with her in-laws after getting married. During this time, she not only had to wake up very early in the morning to prepare all the meals for the day before going to work, but also had the responsibility of serving the meals to her in-laws and maintaining the cleanliness of the house. Subsequently, after giving birth to her son, she had to take on the preparation of his school meals in addition to her husband's. She recounts her routine of returning home from work and then going back to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Her husband was completely inexperienced with the kitchen tasks, so she had to handle all the responsibilities alone. In addition, she would supervise her son as he studied, making him sit in the kitchen while she worked and he completed his homework. According to her, it was expected that every woman would fulfil this responsibility once she was married and had children. Over time, her responsibility to perform all household chores by herself decreased as they were able to hire a residential domestic helper, a young girl from the Duars region of West Bengal. Eventually, this girl was replaced by another local girl and the hiring continues to the present time. Currently, she no longer has to physically participate in kitchen work but instead supervises the tasks being carried out by her domestic help. Upon reflection, she remembers those times as a challenging endeavour to effectively handle all tasks within the allotted time. Nevertheless, she perceives this responsibility as her duty, which garnered admiration from her family members and neighbours. She discusses how that event transformed her into a capable lady of the house, who worked in and outside the house and whose decision-making was also valued.

Another case involves Prashanti, a 50-year-old government employee, residing with her spouse and children at her paternal home. She discusses the time management she had to put up with in balancing her work and familial responsibilities. Following her marriage, she made the decision to reside with her mother, who was both widowed and partially paralyzed. As a result, her husband consented to remain with them in order to provide care. Despite having to reside in her own home, she was mostly responsible for handling the majority of domestic duties, while her husband occasionally assisted her in the kitchen. However, she
acknowledged that the main duty fell on her. She expressed concern about potential criticism if she were to consistently ask her husband for help in the kitchen and other household chores. She worried that her husband might be ridiculed for assuming the role of a ghar-jwai (someone who resides at the wife's house after marriage) who is made to work like a woman in the house. Over time, she asserts that both of them share responsibility, and she habitually takes on the majority of responsibilities on her own.

Deepa, a 45-year-old government nursing staff, discusses the shifting schedules at work at her job that periodically prevent her from being at home during nighttime or morning shifts. She lives with her husband and a daughter. It has been a couple of years since her spouse has voluntarily retired from service in the Indian army and is able to assist her with all domestic tasks. In addition, he supervises their daughter's academic progress on a daily basis, prepares meals, and does the grocery shopping in her absence. She believes she is fortunate to have a spouse who assists her in all aspects, enabling her to maintain an appropriate balance between her work and personal life. However, she acknowledges that she makes an effort to do the majority of the household chores while at home in order to avoid placing an extra burden on her spouse since it is mainly her work as a woman with him just providing a helping hand.

Certainly, these working women were required to begin their household duties after spending hours at work; their employment did not exempt them from their domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, the key aspect underscored by the aforementioned accounts of women is that while it may seem that working women are responsible for the "second shift," the women themselves do not view it as such. They do not consider it a burden or additional work, but rather an inherent responsibility that every mother, wife and daughter-in-law should fulfil. The respondents' belief aligns with arguments of other notable studies (reviewed and referenced in Carriero, 2021) which posit that when women engage in more housework than men, it is not merely a mundane task but rather a way to express their gender identity. The studies highlight that by performing domestic chores, women demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling their expected gender identity. Therefore, if women and men see and behave towards domestic work in this manner, it indicates that, to some degree, they have internalized this cultural ideology of domestic work as women’s primary work and view it as an essential element of proper female identity.
It is to be mentioned here, that not all women respondents indicated tolerance of their double workload. Some women expressed that they sometimes expected their partners to voluntarily take up domestic tasks without being prompted, but this was not the usual situation. Only in the event of their wives being ill would they be seen engaging in chores at home. Depending on their financial situation, to lessen the workload on themselves, some of the respondents chose to engage women domestic helpers mostly during the daytime. This follows Menon’s (2012) argument that the woman of the house is often expected to either perform household tasks herself or ensure that they are carried out by a low-paid woman from a lower socioeconomic background.

Another example is Beena’s case, a 40-year-old primary school teacher at a government school who also runs her own business. She discussed the disparity in the level of comfort and leisure experienced by women and men at home, even when performing the same job. She expresses sadness and raises questions about the gendered division of labour in our culture upon witnessing Marwari men shopkeepers being served lunch and tea by their wives everyday at their stores. In her words, “Women also run businesses, like herself, but we do not get the same kind of treatment from our families even though we work as hard as the men”. Regardless of the rush of her day at work, she describes the necessity of returning home and single-handedly managing all tasks, marking the beginning of her 'second shift'. Thus, in order to keep up with her work and domestic responsibilities, she hired the help of a woman to aid her with household tasks on weekends for a few hours. This narrative of Beena and others previously discussed are illustrations of how a working woman has to divide her time between domestic responsibilities and her paid work. Therefore, one of the strains is a time-crunch brought about by the need to manage multiple roles (Fox and Nickols, 1983). A married woman who tries to combine her career and family is certainly caught up in this time crunch; however the intensity may vary from individual to individual positioned differently in society. The gendered division of work is also impacted by a range of factors, such as societal expectations, cultural norms, economic situations, and individual choices (Tornello, 2020) along with a woman’s subjective identity of caste, class, age, educational background and so on.
Conclusion

While there may be some noticeable modifications with regard to the division of labour within some families and variations across households, it can be generally concluded within the scope of this paper that traditional gender roles and expectations still persist. Despite trends in increasing participation of women in paid work in the hills, working women, especially married women, continue to perform the lion's share of unpaid domestic work and childcare. The dynamics of gender relationships between a married couple and their interactions with other family members are undoubtedly influenced by the larger cultural framework operating at the societal level. These frameworks establish guidelines for a marital dyad to structure their everyday lives in accordance with culturally determined standards. The division of labour in Darjeeling, like in other patriarchal societies, is influenced by such culturally determined standards. As noted by Menon (2012), such cultural norms reflect the belief that domestic work is primarily the responsibility of women, even if they are employed outside the home and are earning an income.

References


Sheikh, Bisma F. "On world women’s day: there is no such thing as a 'non-working' woman." Kashmir Reader, 8 March 2021. Retrieved 29 July 2022.


**Bionote:** Ritu Mangar holds a Master’s degree in Sociology from University of North Bengal, Darjeeling. At present, she is pursuing her Ph.D. degree in Sociology from Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling. Her research focuses on women, work, and family. In general, her research interests include Women and Gender Studies, Labour Studies, Urban and Himalayan Studies. She has previously published book reviews and research articles centering around women’s issues.
Empowering Women through Self Help Groups led Microcredit: A Novel Initiative

Veena Renjini KK
Associate Professor
Department of Economics, University College
Thiruvananthapuram
Mail ID: veenaisec@gmail.com

Abstract: In this paper, an exploratory analysis is made to comprehend whether microcredit has empowered women by increasing their access to credit and if so to what extent and how. It is not only poverty alleviation, microcredit has empowered women by increasing their access to credit, instilling banking habits and raising family income. It has been instrumental in pushing them out of debt trap. Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) play a significant role on account of their capacity to meet the financial needs of the poor who are excluded from institutional finance due to lack of collateral. They include facilities such as deposits, loans, payment services, money transfers, and insurance to poor and low-income households and their micro-enterprises. The concept of ‘enhanced agency’ Sen (1995) that refers to people’s ability to act on behalf of goals that matter to them is used to understand women empowerment through participation in microfinance. This paper is the report of a study carried out at Kalliyoor panchayat in Nemom block, Thiruvananthapuram, with a sample size of 110. The study relies on quantitative as well as qualitative research tools.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Financial Empowerment, Social Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Self Help Groups, Microfinance

1. Introduction

Women’s productive role behind nation building and their own rights have been well acclaimed and therefore, the first international Women’s Conference held in Mexico in 1975 formulated strategies for improving the financial capabilities of women. Credit being the major constraint of women workers (Mayoux, 2005) and the rural credit market having imperfect information (Hoff & Stiglitz, 1993) microfinance institutions have gained
significance. In this paper, microcredit and microfinance are used interchangeably. The microcredit institution’s collective effort has not only imparted financial capabilities with better financial discipline to women but also reduced the gender gap. Empowering women through microcredit has a wide range of spillover effects observed in economic empowerment, well-being of women and their families, and social and political empowerment. The group meetings and group lending techniques focusing on women have led to strengthening of the social capital for community development as a whole. The group based microcredit programmes are in fact venues for increased exchange of information and social participation. Self Help Groups (SHGs) are made up of ten to twenty women who get together on a regular basis to deposit money into an account that is held by the group and from which loans can be requested when needed. Women who are economically and ethnically homogeneous and who reside close to one another usually form these groups (Baland, Somanathan, & Vandewalle, 2019).

1.1 Measuring Empowerment:

“Empowerment means enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making. And it means removing the barriers – political, legal, and social – that work against particular groups and building the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets” (World Development Report, 2001). The World Bank’s (2002) manual defines empowerment as: “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.” This operational definition puts forward the idea that to materialise, measure and evaluate the concept of empowerment, bringing together distinct elements such as political processes that lead to decentralisation, awareness building of stakeholders and instilling a democratic perception would be most effective.

Another means whereby we measure empowerment is by relating it with transformative agency (Kabeer 2001) and how the process of empowerment begins from within. It highlights not only their role in decision making but also includes any other form of observable action and its meaning, motivation and purpose ie., the agency approach. In its
broader sense, it can be regarded as a kind of introspection- ‘seeing within yourself’- the essence of self-worth. It is better understood through the perceptions of people about them and the society. Hence, the conceptualisation and measurement of empowerment is being understood from two perspectives – empowerment as ‘enhanced agency’ and empowerment as ‘transformative agency’. The first conceptualisation will enable us to measure empowerment on account of participation in microcredit programmes while the second conceptualisation of empowerment would enable us to see whether membership in microfinance programmes is helping to attain the long-term goal of gender equality. In general, agency is defined as a person’s ability to act on behalf of the goals that matter to him/her (Dreze and Sen, 1989). The conceptual framework is formulated on the premise that an enhancement in agency is attributed as empowerment (Alkire 2005). Here, an attempt is being made to measure the agency of respondents so as to assess empowerment in terms of their decision making capacity regarding the education of their children, health, mobility, group life, household duties and financial management.

The concept of development or empowerment indicates an increase in choices and thereby to enhance ‘freedoms’ (Sen 1999); empowerment is movement from an inability to ability to make choice (Kabeer, 1999); removal of constraints i.e., social, institutional, internal and so on that lessen women’s capacity to go ahead with their interests. Thus, women empowerment is understood as developing new skills, performing a decisive role in household decision-making power, and improving one’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

1.2 The Paradigms of Women Empowerment:

The first paradigm, the Feminist Empowerment paradigm concerns gender equality and human rights and it will be reflected more in social transformation. The second paradigm is basically the Poverty Alleviation paradigm which in fact focuses on increasing capabilities and choices, thereby decreasing the vulnerability of poor people. The status of women becomes a significant factor here because of the higher incidence of female poverty rates and the belief that wellbeing of women leads to healthy families. Next comes the most important paradigm i.e., Financial Sustainability. Here, the focal group consists of women because of their greater commitment to repayment of loans. The financial stability itself ensures
economic stability leading to decision making power with respect to thrift, credit and setting up of some small scale handicraft making units. All these factors will in due course of time lead to social and political empowerment of women. The primary hypothesis is that empowerment through all these spheres will mutually reinforce each other and bring social and political empowerment of women. Individual agency and social realities are not in conflict with each other because as a social phenomenon, individual agency depends on social relations for its realization and appropriation. Women’s enhanced agency is reflective of social conditions and hence requires societal monitoring (Saha).

1.3 Objective: The objective of the paper is to examine the relative effectiveness of SHGs/Microcredit Institutions in supporting women empowerment.

1.4 Methodology and Data Source:

The entire study was based on the questionnaire designed to analyse the empowerment of women through Self Help Groups (SHG) led microcredit. The economic empowerment and more specifically the financial capabilities of the respondents is understood through participation in microcredit/finance. Any study on empowerment is context specific; the region under focus in the present study is Nemom Block, Kalliyoor Panchayat, Thiruvananthapuram. A kind of stratified random sampling procedure was chosen – particular purposive selection of the state and from the state to a selected district, from district to block and panchayat level. The respondents were members belonging to Microfinance Institutions/SHGs and were chosen randomly.

The study is both quantitative and qualitative. A well-structured questionnaire is used to collect quantitative information. Detailed interviews were also conducted to collect qualitative information from the respondents. Focus group discussions of one to two hours had also been carried out for eliciting maximum information. The survey was undertaken over a period of 2 months (September and October) with two or three pilot rounds and necessary revisions to the survey were made subsequently. The variables have been constructed following the methodology used in “Measuring individual agency or empowerment: A study in Kerala” (Pillai and Alkire, 2007).
2. Theoretical Framework

Empowerment through SHGs takes a participatory approach, and the theory of “learned hopefulness” propounded by Zimmerman (1990) explains this participatory mode of empowerment. The theory of “learned hopefulness” explains the relationship between empowerment and participation. It is defined as “the process whereby individuals learn and utilize skills that enable them to cultivate a sense of psychological empowerment.” The theory argues that participation in community organisations and activities meaningfully augments one’s analytical and problem-solving skills and supplements command and control over the social environment. Kondal (2014) made an attempt to understand the impact of SHGs on women empowerment. The study was carried out with a sample of 100 respondents, 25 each from 4 different villages in the Gajwel Mandal of Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. Along with the socio-economic profile, they collected variables that explained the capacity building of women – a forum for collective learning with rural people, promotion of democratic culture, equality of status of women as participants, financial inclusiveness and the provision to avail credit from financial institutions. The study was able to justify the fact that SHGs have been highly effective in increasing empowerment of women by making them financially strong and economically self-reliant with much self-confidence.

Brody et al (2015) conducted a methodical analysis of the efficacy of women’s economic SHG programs, integrating the findings from quantitative and qualitative studies. Review from quantitative synthesis suggested that economic SHGs have optimistic effects on various magnitudes of women’s empowerment, including that of economic, social, and political empowerment. Findings from qualitative studies too recommended that the positive effects of SHGs on economic, social, and political empowerment depended on acquaintance with management of money together with independence in financial decision making, enhanced community networks, and respect from home and other community members. A total of 23 quantitative and 11 qualitative studies were taken up. Women's economic SHGs led to positive and statistically significant effects on a range of women's empowerment dimensions, including political, social, and economic empowerment, with an SD of 0.06-0.41.
Nayak, A. K., & Panigrahi, P. K. (2020) examined the efficacy of microfinance as a tool in understanding the empowerment of the underprivileged through an analysis of the level of participation of the women members of the SHGs. It was measured by creating new scales using the degree of empowerment at political, social and economic levels, inclusivity of different age groups, place of residence, and socio-economic status. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used and the data generated from an interview schedule consisting of 353 female SHG members from Odisha. The study disclosed the fact that members of SHGs who have a higher level of participation have recorded greater empowerment as a consequence of enhanced employment scenarios, augmented income, job stability, and greater entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, the study highlighted the fact there was social empowerment as well, exemplified in their capacity building.

Kaushal & Sharma (2020) examined the growth pattern of SHGs in Himachal Pradesh to study women empowerment. The study showed a clear upward trend hinting that SHGs are helping significantly in financial inclusion of poor women. Their association with the SHG movement enabled them to link themselves with a formal banking system to avail microcredit. This has altogether led to improvement in their decision making and risk-taking habits. Thangamani & Muthuselvi (2013) attempted to study if self-help groups in Metupalayam district of Tamilnadu, India had effectively promoted their well-being and hence empowerment. The study made use of a random sampling method for collecting information from primary sources. The hypothesis that women empowerment in social and economic domains was greatly impacted by their involvement in Self Help Groups (SHGs) was tested using Chi Square to understand whether the two attributes were related or not. Similarly, the Garret ranking technique was used to examine the enthusiasm of women in joining the self-help group. The findings of the study disclosed that the SHGs had a higher impact on the recipients' community and economic lives and therefore empowerment.

In Kumar et al (2021), the observation was that the majority of women's groups programs in India were carried out by self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs were first fashioned as savings and credit organizations, but now they also played a bigger role in addressing social issues like caste- and gender-based discernment, strengthening governance, and increasing cognizance of health and nutrition. The study tried to understand the relationship between
SHG membership and women empowerment in the agricultural sector by making use of Panel data from 1470 Indian rural women across five different states. Their research finding was that being a member of a self-help group (SHG) significantly improved women's empowerment and narrowed down the gender discrepancy in empowerment scores. The participatory approach leading to empowerment as reflected in all facets was confirmed by empirics as well. Based on the studies already done, this paper would be exploring whether the same has been effective in transforming women from within and thus acting on behalf of their ambitions.

3. Participation in SHGs: An Indicator of Women Empowerment

The buzzword empowerment has been understood from the perspective of participatory approach and increased participation in SHGs as members and office bearers is considered as an indicator of empowerment (Nayak and Panigrahi 2020). Membership is approached here as a proxy for participation (Parker 1983) as well as empowerment (Zimmerman 1990). Scaling from the previous studies, the following variables were used to collect responses and codify them either as dichotomous (yes or no) variables or in cardinal values – membership in SHG, hours of participation per week, engagement in number of months, weekly attendance, leadership positions, financial contributions, internal control and working in the capacity of office bearers.

3.1 Movement Outside Home and Participation in Public life

Women who had the privilege to move outside their home as part of group life liberated them from their routine household chores and isolated domestic life. They eventually gained knowledge about what is happening in and around them and the solutions to social and domestic issues. This led to capacity building among the women folk and they were able to use this knowledge to further their ambitions and to explore those areas which were previously either restricted to women or ignored by them. During the investigation, the majority of them expressed the difference in their lives after joining SHG. They were free to sell their labour in one village over another because of their increased connectivity, thus ensuring their mobility.
Public life in the village was earlier exclusively reserved for men in the traditional literature of rural life. But things have changed as a result of the growth and development of SHGs. Some of the participants shared their experience of being earlier restricted to the four walls of their house but now having attained the confidence to move out of their homes to different government offices, schools, health centres and so on to articulate their grievances. Knowledge about different Government schemes, discussions on various income generating activities at small scale level, greater awareness about pressing social issues and probable solutions to them have changed women’s mindset which was earlier rooted in traditions.

Table No:1 Women Empowerment and Participation in SHGs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement Instrument / Parameters Used</th>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Option</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP1</td>
<td>Length/time span of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP2</td>
<td>Number/frequency of loans taken by members from SHGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP3</td>
<td>Volume/size of loans taken by the member from SHGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP4</td>
<td>Number/frequency of loans taken by the group from the banks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP5</td>
<td>Volume/size of loans taken by the group from the banks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOP</td>
<td>LOP6</td>
<td>Number/frequency of income-generating activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From table1, it is understood that participating in SHGs has enhanced or transformed women as substantiated through the details of the variables collected - length/time span of participation, frequency and volume of loan taken, investment of the loan amount in income generating activities, mobilisation of savings, nature and range of participation in SHGs events and efforts to bring others too in SHGs as they participate more in the activities of SHGs. The variables emphasise the fact that participation of women in SHGs transformed them by creating a capacity from ‘within’. Though measuring empowerment is highly complex and a complete comprehensive scale of measurement is difficult, the participatory approach of analysing empowerment makes use of or validates the above scales that have had a tremendous bearing on measuring empowerment. With the diagnostic and descriptive research design, the data collected from the members of different SHGs by making use of structured interviews has comprehensively captured the fact that women empowerment increased with participation in SHGs.

### 3.2 Decision Making: An Indicator of Women Empowerment

A survey of previous decision making capacity of women at personal, household and community level indicates that gradual phases of development resulted in empowerment. This hypothesis has also been supported by earlier studies (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005;
Ibrahim and Alkire 2002; Kabeer 1999; Mayoux, 2005). The policies taken at institutional level urges and focuses on this matter. Those cases where women do have decision-making power along with their partners in the intrafamily relationship highlight the increasing role of women in shaping their family entitlements, thereby manifest their empowerment. Hence, the decision-making power of women is qualitatively measured in most domains of everyday life that include having a word on household expenditure, education of their children, decisions to address health requirements, political decisions, addressing their voice in marriage related matters in the case of their children or providing space for ‘marriage by consent’ in the case of unmarried adults.

Table no. 2 below furnishes the involvement of members and the voice of women considered in taking decisions at household level.

Table No:2 Women Empowerment in Intra-Household Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent (Female Household) only</th>
<th>12 (10.9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband (Life partner only)</td>
<td>8 (7.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Decision (Husband and Wife)</td>
<td>48 (43.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult members (including in laws)</td>
<td>18 (16.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult members (children only, excluding in laws)</td>
<td>24 (21.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation; Figures in parentheses are percentages

Among the respondents, 43.63 per cent of women opined that their voices are being heard while taking decisions at household level as they join with the head of the family in the decision making process. It reveals that they command mutual respect and appreciation in their own family which is the primary unit of analysis. The importance of the voices of the adult members including children and in-laws are 18 per cent and 24 per cent respectively which is again a healthy trend in collective decision-making process. Thus, women being in the mainstream of decision-making reflects their enhanced capability.
Table No:3 Women Empowerment and Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Range</th>
<th>Household Expenditure</th>
<th>Education of Children</th>
<th>Political Decisions</th>
<th>Marriage of Children</th>
<th>Health and wellness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To a reasonably high degree</td>
<td>48(43.63)</td>
<td>54(49.09)</td>
<td>60(54.54)</td>
<td>34(30.9)</td>
<td>64(58.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a moderately high degree</td>
<td>42(38.18)</td>
<td>44(40)</td>
<td>33(30)</td>
<td>38(34.54)</td>
<td>35(31.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a very small Degree</td>
<td>20(18.18)</td>
<td>12(10.9)</td>
<td>17(15.45)</td>
<td>38(34.54)</td>
<td>11(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Considered</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation; Figures in parentheses are percentages

The field level reactions of the respondents with regard to their decision-making power on household expenditure, education of their children, political decision making, decision making related to the marriage of their children and their own health and wellness tell us that they feel empowered as their opinions are being considered to a high degree. The qualitative statements made by them shows that there decision making power is higher with regard to the parameters like household expenditure (43.63), education of their children (49.09), political decision making (54.54), decision making related to the marriage of their children (30.9) and their own health and wellness(58.18). Moreover, it may be inferred that they understood the importance of education for the next generation and of their own health amongst others. Thus, it may be inferred that their upper hand in decision-making with regard to all these parameters reveals that SHGs are very productive in empowering the incumbents. These factors ensure a decent standard of living with good welfare and happiness index.
3.3 Financial Skills: An Indicator of Women Empowerment

An increase in credit availability and an improvement in financial skills is also proved to be an indicator to access empowerment and therefore is a measuring rod for the same. Those SHGs which reach a maturity are provided linkages to bank accounts and other lines of credit, thus introduces to formal banking system, from which they can avail credit. Higher control over income, more decision-making power over credit, and more active participation in community groups are the main factors contributing to higher levels of aggregate empowerment for women SHG members. Every effort has been made to examine the competency of rural women in managing financial requirements and financial inclusion towards formal financial system.

Efforts have been made to understand the exposure of respondents towards institutional finance. Data shows that now they have bank pass book and SHG account book and this has encouraged thrift habit among the members. A weekly collection of Rs50 from members enabled them to mobilise savings and to manage manual book keeping accounts. The collected amount will be deposited with the bank and thus exposes them to formal banking system. All the members have to open bank accounts at least with zero balance, bringing them in the pathway of financial inclusion. It is understood that all the 110 respondents have savings bank account at individual level. Group savings bank account is opened under the name of that particular SHG and the office bearers, especially the president and the secretary, operate the same on behalf of the SHG members. This has enabled them to avail loan from the formal financial system, made them aware to avail different schemes for the rural poor.

Table No:4 Exposure to Institutional Finance through SHGs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposure to Institutional Finance of SHG Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Individual Savings Bank Account</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table no 4 exhibits the extent of financial awareness among members. All the SHG members in our sample have operational bank accounts at individual level, thus having 100 percent financial literacy. Group account is maintained in the name of that particular SHG and the office bearers voluntarily become part of that. The sample is taken from 24 SHGs operating in the locality and two office bearers from each unit takes the responsibility of opening group accounts. Therefore, 43.63 per cent of our sample respondents have a group bank account also. The study also tried to understand the accounting efficiency of the respondents to manage the fund that is being pooled in SHG meetings. They have weekly savings of Rs 50 per member and have chitty revolved on monthly basis with an amount of Rs 1000 for each subscriber. So they require sufficient skill to manage the account-both credit as well as debit. The responses of the respondents are codified in the table furnished below.

**Table No:5 SHG Members and Financial Accounting Efficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accounting Efficiency</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for Assessment</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Competency for Manual Accounting</td>
<td>45 (40.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Competency for Book Keeping Loan Management</td>
<td>48 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Competency for Manual Accounting &amp; Loan management</td>
<td>45 (40.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation; Figures in parentheses are percentages
It is understood that 40.9 percent of the respondents learned to manage the flow of accounts in manual bookkeeping fashion by entering the credit and debit figures corresponding to their group. There has been an internal flow of money used for the availing of loans by the members, which also needed to be properly recorded. 43 percent of the respondents have gained competency in recording, bookkeeping and loan management. This implies that around 50 percent of the SHG respondents are competent to handle the common pool of money effectively as in the formal financial system.

The respondents were asked to reveal whether they have availed a loan to meet their personal requirements by taking decisions themselves or in consultation with their family members. The facts provided by the respondents have been furnished in the table below

**Table No.6 SHGs members and Microcredit Availing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for Assessment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) Self or Respondent</td>
<td>32 (29.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Husband</td>
<td>24 (21.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Children</td>
<td>8 (7.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) Jointly or for the family</td>
<td>46 (41.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation; Figures in parentheses are percentages

While analysing the response of the respondents it is understood that 41.81 percent of them availed loans as the joint initiative of the family members to meet the requirements of the family. 29.09 percent of them availed loans to meet their personal requirements either because they belonged to single headed households or were widows who were relying on themselves. Thus, either joint decision making with the life partner or individual decision
making governs the credit availing capacity of the members. This shows the enhanced agency of women in financial decision making. Efforts too have also been made to understand the utilisation or spending pattern of the loans taken before.

### Table No: 7 SHGs members and Utilisation Pattern of Availed Microcredit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utilisation/Spending Pattern of last loan taken</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Self or respondent’s income generation requirement</td>
<td>24 (21.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Income generation requirement for husband + saving</td>
<td>12 (10.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Income generation + repayment of other loans + saving</td>
<td>28 (25.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) Income generation + repayment of other loans + household expenditure + education + marriage + saving</td>
<td>46 (41.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation; Figures in parentheses are percentages

About 21.81 percent of the respondents opined that they spent the loan amount towards their income generation that included starting a stitching unit, getting some livestock, keeping a small poultry farm, buying some household consumer durables etc. 28 percent of them spent their loan amount for income generation activities, repayment of their other loans and the rest of the amount was kept as savings. The loan amount availed is mainly utilised for meeting the requirements such as purchasing consumer durables, repayment of other loans taken, meeting the educational needs of their children, marriage related expenses and for future savings. Of the 110 sample respondents, 41.81 percent channelise money to meet these kinds of requirements, all meant for their wellbeing. These income generating activities ensure them financial stability and a reasonably good standard of living with self-esteem. This in fact shows that the members of the microfinance organisations do have the capacity to manage the
loan amount they have taken and that shows their financial empowerment. They have not been defaulters of the loan, as it involved a collective responsibility.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The results of the study substantiate the argument that an enlarged level of participation in SHGs marks an improvement in empowerment of women in all facets of their life. Their economic empowerment is being observed in availing more employment opportunities and thus having higher income, and improved entrepreneurial abilities by starting new ventures like small startups. Moreover, higher participation in SHGs also put in place higher social empowerment of members observed in their decision-making skills in the households, freedom to move out of their home and to participate in meetings, awareness and accessibility to healthcare requirements, a high-pitched improvement in self-confidence, marvellous development in self-esteem, advancement in communication skills, and the aptitude to transact with bank and other government officials. The empowerment potential of microfinance led by SHG’s has widely been recognized by scholars like Al-Mamun, Mohiuddin & Mariapun(2014); Angelucci, Karlan, & Zinman (2015) and hence our study results are consistent with that of other scholars. The linkages between microcredit and women empowerment can be a proxy to explain financial empowerment. The process of women empowerment is understood from women’s improvement in their capability in managing financial variables such as bookkeeping, saving and credit. Their exposure to institutional finance such as Group saving bank accounts, household bank accounts etc explains financial literacy. Purpose of borrowing and control over loan use i.e., to invest in income generating activities, marriage related expenditure, household expenditure, for buying consumer durables, for meeting health expenses and repudiation of old loans taken, discloses the success of SHGs leading to financial empowerment and its sustainability among our respondents. Women’s greater control of credit through SHGs has resulted in a greater role in decision making along with their husband for the family as a whole. Thus, as exemplified through the study, there is every reason to argue that there has been addition to social capital and of course community development; women have been in the mainstream of the development paradigm substituting patriarchy with a comprehensive measure of women empowerment in all dimensions - economic, social and political.
References


**Bionote:** Dr. Veena Renjini is Associate Professor at the Department of Economics, University College, Thiruvananthapuram. She completed her PhD from the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), a premier research institute in Bangalore. Her research publications include Trade Potential of the Fisheries Sector: Evidence from India, Agricultural Situation in India, Vol.LXXXIII, 2016, Quantifying the Effect of Non-Tariff Measures and Food Safety Standards on India’s Fish and Fishery Products’ Exports, Working Paper 375, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, Service sector led Growth Trajectory of Kerala economy, Kerala Economy, Gulati Institute for Finance and Taxation, Vol.5 No.2 April -June 2024 and so on. Her areas of interest are gender disparity issues, international trade and Econometrics.
Survivor Narratives and the Politics of Echmukutty’s Memoir

T. Amiya
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Mail ID: amiyathajudeen1998@gmail.com

Abstract: Recognising the poignance of women’s autobiographical discourses in engendering discussions around domestic abuse and sexual violence, this study takes up the memoir *Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka* (This is My Blood, This is My Flesh, Take Them) by the Malayalam writer Echmukutty to examine the politics and possibilities of the narrative in not only exposing the microstructures of hegemonic patriarchy but also in fostering feminist dialogues on women’s rights and justice. To this end, the study reads the select memoir as a ‘claims narrative’ that forges affective ties with its readers, thereby claiming an ethical response from them. The study critically contextualises the memoir to tease out the ways in which Echmukutty narratively constructs her identity position as an agential subject who speaks and affectively prods others to speak. It further argues that Echmukutty’s memoir—an archive of trauma—potentially serves to problematize and, to an extent, alter the generic perceptions regarding the state’s development narratives.

Keywords: Trauma, Claims Narrative, Victim, Survivor, Affect

In 2018, an accusation of paedophilia against a renowned Malayalam poet shook the Kerala literary sphere, precipitating shockwaves across the state and instigating several women from the field to unite in solidarity with the survivor by sharing their own experiences of sexual abuse. Significantly, this happened against the backdrop of the rising prominence of #MeToo discourses in the public domain of Kerala following the abduction and sexual assault of a film actor. Echmukutty began publishing her autobiographical account on Facebook around the same time (2018-19), which soon garnered widespread attention for its candid discussion of violence as well as for its audaciousness in calling out some of the much-celebrated icons of Malayalam literature. These Facebook posts were initially titled
Mathakkurippukal (loosely translated as “Notes on Religion”), signifying Echmukutty’s reflections on her fraught encounter with the institution of religion. However, as the story further unfolded and began addressing the microaggressions of everyday life, it necessitated an alternate title that could adequately capture the complexity of the narrated experiences. Consequently, when these Facebook posts were published as a memoir, Echmukutty titled it Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka (“Ente Rakthavum” 0:43-3:10).

By critically engaging with Echmukutty’s memoir Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka, notable for the vigorous discussion it engenders around the issue of domestic violence, this study seeks to demonstrate how the narrative forms a feasible and critical ground for the victimised gendered subject to perform her trauma, thereby fostering a new identity position. It submits that this newly configured autobiographical identity is of an agential subject who, by claiming her story, forges affective ties with her readers. At the very outset of this study, it is imperative to acknowledge that scholarly engagements with survivor narratives are often enrobed by two intertwined, yet apparently contradictory, strains of thought (Gilmore *The Limits* 6). On the one hand, there is the question of the fraught relationship between trauma and its representation through language, and on the other hand, there are the therapeutic possibilities of writing trauma.

This study, however, strategically shifts its attention beyond such theoretical ambivalences to focus exclusively on the politics and possibilities of publicly performing trauma. That is, though the study deploys trauma as a critical concept to analyse the select memoir, it does not extensively delve into trauma theories. Also, while the study acknowledges the plausibility of “scriptotherapy” (Henke xv), it moves beyond an analysis of the memoir’s cathartic and recuperative powers. The study, instead, contextualises the memoir to gain insights into the ways in which it serves as a tool—a claims narrative—for feminist praxis, especially when speaking publicly about abuse and rape risks one’s personhood.

Echmukutty’s childhood, as she recounts in the memoir, was plagued by the horrors of domestic violence. Though she soon moved out of her parent’s house with Joseph (the pseudonym she uses in the memoir to address her ex-partner), she faced caste-based prejudice
from his family and was even barred from entering his ancestral home. Echmukutty recalls how Joseph, a self-proclaimed feminist and an established Malayalam poet and academician, insisted that she should not garland the picture of Jesus Christ on their front wall (Echmukutty 95). Adjudged incapable of fulfilling domestic duties like a Christian wife, Echmukutty was dismissed as an unsuitable match for Joseph, even by their ‘feminist’ friends. Her struggle reached a crescendo when the mental torment escalated into physical abuse. The persisting sense of insecurity, helplessness, and shame were compounded by the sexual harassment she faced from Joseph’s friends. The absence of immediate family support, her legal status as an unmarried mother, and the ensuant lack of cultural capital further diminished her prospect of being recognised as a human subject deserving of justice.

Then, the question is, how does Echmukutty—a victimised and an othered subject—fashion herself as a speaking subject? The paper argues that Echmukutty’s autobiographical act of publicly owning her story has engendered the political possibility for her to constitute herself as an agential subject, claiming an ethical response from her readers. Her autobiographical act, similar to #MeToo testimonies, risks the uncertainties inherent in publicly speaking of sexual abuse yet takes up centre stage and functions as what Pramod K. Nair calls “claims narrative.” According to Nayar, such narratives “could be those within a court of justice or they could be life narratives that consciously or unconsciously set up ‘affective communities,’ making a claim upon us, readers, demanding an ethical response” (“Postcolonial” 75).

Typically, first-person trauma narratives are supplemented by paratextual elements like a forward, preface, introduction, and/or editor’s notes to prepare readers for the life story that unfolds (Nayar, “Trauma” 42). In addition to underscoring the sentimental nature inherent in such narratives, these elements validate them by providing contextual information. However, Echmukutty’s memoir notably lacks any form of paratextual intervention. Absent are the voices of academicians or other literary figures to authenticate the narrative—an absence attributed in part to the memoir’s initial mode of publication as Facebook posts that circumvented traditional intermediary filters. Additionally, given that Echmukutty’s narrative implicates some prominent literary figures, there is a conspicuous reluctance within the literary and academic spheres to engage with it. Echmukutty herself had
initially expressed disillusionment with the prospects of publishing her narrative, doubting the willingness of mainstream publishers and cultural stalwarts to support her cause ("360: Echmukutty” 9:03-10:00). Though DC Books later published her memoir, her dubiety proved partly correct as so far there are only a few feminist discussions on the narrative ("Jeevithathil” 14:04-14)—a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

Leigh Gilmore, in her book *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, observes that women speaking of sexual violence are subjected “to practices of shaming and discrediting” (5). So, when the veracity of the narrated experience is constantly questioned, and there is no critical intervention to set the stage for the unfolding of the survivor’s story, the narrator herself has to vouch for her own legitimacy. Echmukutty does this, particularly by expressing the embodied nature of trauma that permeated half of her life. She, for instance, poignantly titles her memoir as *Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka*, which translates to “This is my blood, this is my flesh, take them,” a concise form of biblical verses that Jesus recounts at the Last Supper.

It is the visceral dimension of her lived life, wounded by experiences of shame and pain, that Echmukutty lays bare in front of her readers and asks them to bear witness. In an interview, Echmukutty discloses the corporeal impact of writing the narrative: “While writing the autobiographical narratives, I was reliving those experiences. What happened as a result was, I lost almost 8 kilos in the three months of writing them. I suffered from severe fever three to four times. My body was responding to the writing” (“Jeevithathil” 20:40-21:04). Her body and the trauma etched into it here functions as a metaphor that structures the whole narrative. It is this “fuller representation” (Nayar, “Trauma” 42) of the somatic dimension of trauma that shapes her narrative. Or in other words, through the memoir, her trauma takes on textual flesh.

Drawing on De Man’s conceptualisation of the links between shame and confession, Linda Anderson, in “Autobiography and the Feminist Subject,” demonstrates how the confessional mode for women can be regressive, “coopting them back into a familiar dynamic where their acts of self-assertion can be allowed to exist socially or psychologically only if contained within a rhetoric of self-abasement and denial” (122-123). Echmukutty’s
memoir, however, carefully navigates this rhetoric of self-denial by welding the narrative of her life with a vehement critique of the enduring culture of misogyny. This, the paper posits, plays a discernible role in shaping Echmukutty’s identity position as an agential autobiographical subject.

Laura Marcus observes in *Auto/biographical Discourses* that “the ‘confessional’ text of autobiographical self-revelation was a dominant form in the 1970s, with major feminist theorists like Kate Millett redefining the autobiographical form in narratives which combined the close record of daily life with the thematics of feminist liberation and self-discovery” (279-280). Rita Felski has earlier pointed out how “through the discussion of, and abstraction from individual experience in relation to a general problematic of sexual politics, feminist confession…appropriates some of the functions of political discourse” (95). However, in *Contemporary Feminist Life Writing* Jennifer Cooke identifies that autobiographical disclosure of rape survivors are moving “beyond the prism of sexual politics,” to “shift the focus away from victimhood” and “add affective force and intensity to those arguments through drawing directly upon their experiences of rape” (38). Even though Echmukutty does not explicitly categorise her narrative endeavour as feminist, the syntax of her autobiographical disclosure, particularly how she attempts to unmask the mechanism of hegemonic structures in nullifying patriarchal violence, renders it feminist. For instance, Echmukutty emotively narrates a harrowing instance of sexual encroachment that attempted to push her beyond the disempowering status of victimhood thus:

That morning, around 11 o’clock, I overheard Joseph talking to someone in the front room. I was in the kitchen, grating coconut, with my saree slightly lifted. It was then that the poet came to drink water and saw me sitting with my head down, grating coconut. It was at that moment that Ayyappan intruded his disgusting nails under my saree and left three marks on my thighs, resembling those on the thighs of Cheeru in the movie *Paleri Manikyam*. Lust had made him a lunatic. The pain, humiliation, and tears from that moment will never leave me in this lifetime. In response, I swiftly hit Ayyappan with the coconut piece I had in my hand. Upon hearing the commotion, Joseph came inside, hit me with the glass plate on which I had
kept the grated coconut, and accused me of misbehaving towards the esteemed poet Ayyappan. (Echmukutty 106)

In the light of Cooke’s argument, this public act of autobiographical disclosure, of owning “the pain, humiliation, and tears,” is a potent political assertion through which the gendered subject refuses the socially bestowed position of silenced victimhood. The act simultaneously hints at the distinct ways in which gendered oppression gets manifested in everyday life and the range of resistance an oppressed subject puts forth against being silenced and labelled as a victim. By declaring, “This is my blood, this is my flesh, take them,” Echmukutty symbolically equates her violated and humiliated body with the tormented body of Jesus Christ, imbuing it with a sense of purity and sacredness, which in turn impart an aura of verity to the narrative. The act draws upon the very faith whose adherents, with their religious hypocrisy, have been instrumental in tormenting her. The juxtaposition stands in stark contrast to an incident where the priest denied her a blessing during Mass due to her non-official status as a Christian. Reflecting upon this, she writes, “The father announced my name through the microphone, declaring that I was unworthy to receive the consecrated bread as I was Hindu, living with a Christian without the sacrament of marriage, thus making him a sinner” (25). The memoir, in the process of detailing Echmukutty’s thwarted expectations and harsh realisations, thus exposes not only the gendered dimension of abuse but also the role of caste in catalysing such oppressions.

Furthermore, rejecting the given name ‘Kala’ and renaming herself as ‘Echmukutty’ marks an evident shift in her self-perception and representation. She develops a deep aversion towards her name upon realising that Joseph, in her absence, addressed their daughter ‘Kala’ (“Jeevithathil” 12:53-13:11). Consequently, she renames herself as ‘Echmu,’ a name that has both personal and symbolic resonance. ‘Echmu’ is derived from ‘Lakshmi,’ the name of a servant who worked in her mother’s ancestral Brahmin household. Hesitant to address a servant as ‘Lakshmi,’ owing to the religious connotations associated with it—the name of a Hindu goddess—her family appropriated it to ‘Echmu’ and mitigated their discomfort (“360: Echmukutty” 30:10-30:36). While Echmukutty’s adoption of the name is, on the one hand, an act of altering her relation to the discourses that earlier shaped her, on the other hand, it is a conscious endeavour of forging solidarity with the marginalised. The autobiographical act of
the self-conscious and other-conscious subject thereby results in a sentimental presentation of traumatic events and an enactment of feminist argument.

From her childhood onwards, Echmukutty witnessed the tumultuous dynamics of a broken family. The harrowing scenes of her mother suffering mental and physical abuse at the hands of her father inevitably shaped her perceptions regarding family and marital life. Aware of the influence of hegemonic discourses in constituting women’s everyday lives, she productively contextualises her personal trauma within the broader framework of systemic misogyny. Echmukutty’s narrative strategy of conflating her experiences with those of other women in her life to reveal how the home serves as a patriarchal site where women face discrimination and violence highlights this. In one of her interviews, when asked about why she decided to write the memoir, she stresses that along with the need to mark her story and make it known to people, it is the realisation that numerous women and girls are going through extreme abuse that prompted her to write it (“Ente Rakthavum” 15:57-17:42).

Though one has to be cautious of the tensions inherent in discourses where the narrator ‘speaks for’ others and the othered, it is equally necessary to acknowledge relationality as an imperative for any autobiographical attempt, where ‘you’ is the requisite condition for ‘I’. “My account of myself is never fully mine, and is never fully for me” (Butler 26). In this regard, while Echmukutty’s act of integrating her story with the pervasive societal issues affecting women’s everyday life is decidedly an attempt to make sense of herself, more significant is how, in the process, she emphasises the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences that complicates and contends with modern orthodoxies that pigeonhole women’s issues.

As Cooke puts forth, “There is audacity in refusing to stop at one’s own story of rape, in travelling past it to the larger socio-economic and political conditions that make rape prevalent” (41). The gendered autobiographical subject, in her attempt to make sense of her trauma, exposes sexual abuse as a by-product of systemic injustice. “Beating can make anyone succumb. That is what beating, swearing, and rape do to women. Some people resort to these acts to vent their rage and assert their dominance. They target the weak and the poor, subjecting them to relentless abuse in any manner they please” (Echmukutty 36). The
memoir, in this regard, stands as a testimonial to women’s collective suffering facilitated by the nuanced functioning of both macro and micro-structures of hegemonic patriarchy and that ironically goes overlooked in the state’s development surveys and much-lauded gender indices. Echmukutty writes about the insensitivity with which gendered oppressions are dealt with in the country thus:

I am not surprised when judges, lawyers, courts, and even some women and men question why I did not run, escape, make noise, or leave the place early. I am certain they are individuals who have not experienced violations or harassment. Regardless of who they are, those who doubt the victims inadvertently side with the abusers and are capable of becoming abusers themselves, given the opportunity. (44)

The discursive practices of systemic violence Echmukutty’s memoir exposes are distinct. She addresses gendered issues ranging from the failings of contemporary feminism in the state to the persisting ambiguity in recognising women as citizens. Observing how even prominent feminists in Kerala privately disparaged her for her dereliction to adhere to patriarchal norms, she recounts that “almost all feminist friends of Joseph advised me to be happy about the freedom I am getting” (Echmukutty 18). The memoir here transforms into a self-reflexive counter-hegemonic narrative that, by problematising the socio-cultural matrices that render abuse the norm, unveils patriarchy in its many subtle forms. Describing the indifference she met with at the Delhi local police station following the coerced separation from her daughter, Echmukutty writes,

As I exited the station, I came to the stark realization that as a woman devoid of privilege, I occupy a nebulous existence within the expansive confines of India. I felt insignificant, unrecognized. The laws of the nation seemed to offer me no refuge. From that moment on, anything bearing the label of national identity ceased to evoke any excitement within me. (128)

However, it is not these thematic concerns alone that render Echmukutty’s memoir affective. The use of language in engendering affect is also significant. As opposed to the impersonal register socially sanctioned as suitable for recording testimony, Echmukutty, a
creative writer, chooses literary language. She translates her trauma into an emotive narrative by augmenting the impact of her narrated experiences using literary ornamentations like metaphors. This aesthetic dimension of the memoir, or what Linda Brooks calls the “poetics” of *testimonio* (182), however, does not diminish its political effect but instead imparts an affective punch to the memoir, shifts the generic understanding of the world, and elevates the narrative of suffering into a narrative of survival.

The narrative, however, received a mixed response from its audience/readers. On the one hand, Echmukutty’s online autobiographical disclosures were subjected to harsh criticism. Some dismissed her accounts as frantic renditions, choosing to criticise Echmukutty “for recounting events from her life as they unfolded over three decades ago” (Binoy), while others, taken aback by the degree of outspokennes, levelled accusations of fictionalising her life. On the other hand, real-time responses like calls, private messages, and public comments significantly sharpened her politics and served as reminders of the growing public support for her cause. Such audience responses, in addition to enabling her narrative performance and affectively shaping her identity, aided in creating “moral webs” (Zarowsky 194) that facilitated the emergence of other marginalised voices articulating their indignation against the prevailing culture of sexism and misogyny. In other words, by embracing her wounded ‘flesh’ and keeping it open, many of her audience/readers experienced and communicated “it in the way that keeps it traumatic for others” (Berlant 44). Echmukutty says,

Many women contact me via phone; many send text messages. Among them are women who write about their lives. There is one lady who wrote about how the kick she got on her lower abdomen remains unexposed till now. Another woman wrote about the pain of a mother who lost her child and wandered in search of it” (27:53-28:18 360 Echmukutty- Part 1)

As a “spectral human,” wounded by systemic violence and whose narrative inhabitation reminds of the systemic issues of the modern world (Gordon 24-25), Echmukutty, the autobiographical subject, exposes the link between the gendered violence perpetrated by patriarchal institutions like family and the persistent failure of the state to
mitigate it. The very nature of her memoir draws attention to the complexities posed by the anxiety of writing, of exposing one’s traumatic past, and the visceral impacts of incidents that are socio-culturally deemed shameful. However, the narrative's political significance lies in the ways in which it serves as a critical ground for the gendered subject to autobiographically detangle and interrogate the socio-cultural power structures that discipline female bodies and subjectivities.

(*The author of the research paper has translated the quotations from the primary text and the interviews.)

References


**Bionote:** T. Amiya is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of English, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. Her doctoral research seeks to gain insights into the autobiographical self-fashioning of contemporary Indian women politicians, with a special focus on their life narratives. Her research interests include Life Writing Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies.
Virtual Discrimination - Advertisements and Self Image

Corrine Rita War  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology  
St. Mary’s College  
Shillong  
Mail ID: corrinefeegrade@gmail.com  

Abstract: The internet has taken our world by storm. Personal branding and self-image, the way we think we need to look is always a passing thought for everyone of us. Advertisements have a way of grabbing the attention of a target audience and are so catchy that they linger in our thoughts long after we first see them. Many of them dictate the way we often see and portray ourselves. They advocate the use of certain products, cell phones, branded apparel, and footwear – all in the name of conspicuous consumption that can set a tone for our image and personal branding which is regarded as ‘acceptable’ by society. Only in recent times, however, have many of these advertisements been called out for their sexist and racial overtones/undertones that have a mental, physical as well as an emotional effect on the lives of individuals. Adolescents and adults alike, people are becoming more and more aware that the way the media portrays their models overshadows our everyday lives. This study aims to examine and investigate how advertisements can influence the way human beings see themselves. It will trace the influence of advertisements over the years and the role it plays in today’s world – one where access to information is so easily available and at a time where people are questioning so many archaic norms. With special reference to Erving Goffman’s famous work – Gender Advertisements (1976) – and other secondary sources of data like journals and articles, this study seeks to correlate theory with real life examples from the Entertainment Industry.

Keywords: Gender, Discrimination, Media, Advertisements, Feminism

Introduction

There is a fine line between what can be deemed creative or controversial in the advertising world. The internet has taken our world by storm – this, however, is not a new
phenomenon – it has been this way for a long time. Media has been in existence long before our country gained her independence and advertisements have been used for so many purposes – to foster feelings of equality, freedom, liberalism, or purely for entertainment. Technology has evolved but beliefs of many remain orthodox. For the longest time, this has been the way of the world. We accepted what has been fed to us without question. While passive acceptance of established norms may have been prevalent throughout much of history, a recent shift is observable. Individuals are increasingly engaging in critical reflection, challenging previously unquestioned societal constructs surrounding concepts like "normal," "beauty," and "handsomeness."

**Gender: A Brief Understanding**

According to the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, “Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.” According to **GLAAD**, which was formerly known as the **Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation**, gender identity is “one’s internal, personal sense of belonging at some point on or off, of the gender spectrum. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not neatly fit into one of those two choices.”

Gender is regarded as a social construct and is the way that an individual identifies oneself. This individual can choose to do so anywhere within this broad spectrum or even outside of it for that matter. When someone identifies themselves with the gender they have been ascribed with they are known as ‘cisgender’. There is the individual’s natal sex and as they mature, they can feel as though they are ‘outside’ themselves almost as though they do not belong to the body that they were born into. They can choose to identify as **transgender or gender expansive** – which means that they change their gender from male to female or vice-versa and want to broaden society’s views of what gender may be, there is also the **gender-neutral and non-binary** which means the person does not experience gender within the gender binary. The term ‘trans’ is a more inclusive term that covers those who identify as nonbinary and those who are genderless, according to the LGBTQIA Resource Centre.
We tend to think that these gender terms are limited only to ‘modern society’ as such; however, in 1990 at the Indigenous Lesbian and Gay International Gathering at Winnipeg, the term ‘Two Spirit’ was coined which was specifically used to distinguish and distance Native American/First Nations people from Non-Native Peoples. It referred to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

**Gender Commercial Categories by Erving Goffman**

A thorough examination of Erving Goffman’s noted work – *Gender Advertisements*, reveals that men and women are mostly ‘placed’ into certain categories when it comes to gender commercials. Six of these can be mentioned below:

(i) **Relative Size** – Men are generally portrayed as being taller and bigger built than his female counterparts. There are, however, a few exceptions that can ‘prove the rule’ – for instance, if a woman was seen as taller or larger than the man in the advert – it was probably because she was from a higher social status than him. He may be portrayed in this situation as ‘the help’.

(ii) **Feminine Touch** – Women are very often portrayed as being soft and gentle and meek, holding any object that she interacts with in the photo with maternal care. Women who meet this criteria of ‘being feminine’ are chosen as hand models, face models or modelling in general while men may be seen as carrying on a more rugged appearance.

(iii) **Function Ranking** – Based on gender – men and women model for certain adverts and play a particular role accordingly. For instance, a man poses as the doctor and woman as the nurse or the mother holding her child who is being examined by the doctor. Interestingly, these roles are also portrayed by children as well – to quote Goffman, “‘a level of ‘cuteness’ is involved.” (1976:34) Further, in the domain of traditional authority and competence of women – men are seen as taking the subordinate role in the ‘female task’. If pictured, he would be seated reading a newspaper or engaging in his own activity.

(iv) **The Family** – When we think of the image of the family – ideally – what comes to mind is that of two parents and a daughter and a son. Even when pictured,
way they stand and interact with each other has a significance – the father interacts with his son and the mother with her daughter.

(v) **Ritualization of Subordination** – Advertisers draw on this concept – the use of stereotypical behaviour that portrays inferiority and superiority accordingly. Goffman gives us several examples of this – one of which is when we picture a person lowering themselves to greet a superior out of respect.

(vi) **Licensed Withdrawal** – Women in most commercials are seen to be withdrawn or almost preoccupied with other things and appear as to be mentally unaware that a photo is being taken of them – photographs are shot in a candid manner and they are not usually the dominant one in the photograph.

But how many of these categories still hold true to this day? When we talk about the first category – that of ‘Relative Size’, many modelling agencies have now switched this up and make women come to the forefront and make men look the subordinate or the standby model in the frame. As with ‘Feminine Touch’ ‘Rosie the Riveter,’ the famous poster lady icon of World War II whose tagline – ‘We Can Do It!’ challenges the very idea that women are supposed to be feminine and gentle by their very nature. The magazine cover was meant to change the entire spirit of the people and push for a ‘can-do’ attitude among people, especially women. Seeing the popularity of this campaign, the United States government took advantage of Rosie and were able to promote women in the workforce that was previously dominated by men. To this day, Rosie the Riveter is still considered the most successful government advertising campaign in history. Under the category of ‘The Family’, in India the idea or notion of a family is so far and beyond from what was pictured by the First World countries. Here, an ideal and happy family is seen as one where numbers are many – grandparents, parents and children all coming together in one frame – usually with the eldest ones in the family seated at the centre, their children almost standing guard behind them and their grandchildren strewn across the floor seated on the ground.

**Stereotypes - Why they exist**

As Schudson puts it, “the promotional culture of advertising has worked its way into what we read, what we care about, the ways we raise our children, our ideas of right and wrong conduct, our attribution of significance to 'image' in both public and private life”
(1984:13). It is no secret that before an advertisement is put out in the newspaper or played on the television the company collects data through questionnaires and today, even keeps track of the content we view through our devices. This tactic, added with the ‘voice-recognition’, feature is precisely why so many times no sooner we merely utter that we want a holiday or would like to buy a certain product, than the pop-up adverts on our phones are already showing us their suggestions. It’s almost as though our devices are secretly listening to us. But this is in fact the way advertising works. In this Post-Industrial age, data is easily gathered from our mobiles and the kind of content we browse. Algorithms are designed to pick up feelers from the music we listen to on Spotify, the apparel we search for on Myntra and the household and electronic goods we scour through on apps like Amazon and Flipkart.

Marianne Wex, wanted to document gender differences in media throughout history. After collecting some two to three thousand photographs from advertising agencies as well as some taken by her in ‘natural settings’, “‘Wex saw few if any differences between ‘unconsciously assumed postures’ she observed in naturalistic settings and the ‘consciously assumed poses’ of advertising.’” (1979:6) Although Wex worked independently of Goffman, she arrived at one fundamentally similar conclusion: women seem to rehearse subordinating poses and also represent as subordinate to men. By their very nature then, women in the past had accepted society’s norms that they were the weaker sex and how they were to present themselves in public in a refined manner.

Katharina Lindner also used Gender Advertisements as the foundation for her study, *Images of Women in General Interest Fashion Magazine Advertisements from 1955 to 2002.* “‘[Goffman] emphasized that advertisements often contain very subtle clues about gender roles and may operate as socializing agents on several levels. Because advertisements are publicly broadcast, the men and women portrayed are often perceived to represent the whole population, and men & women in the advertisements seem to accept these portrayed behaviours, thereby validating the stereotyped roles.’” (2004:409) When commercials are aired, meaning is created through what is shared on the platform. As Williamson states, “Meaning is created through the audience rather than directed at audiences.” (1978:43). How we understand and subsequently exchange that meaning is based on our cultural knowledge.
It is without a doubt then that stereotypes – the widely accepted idea of a particular thing exists because we let it.

Back in the day, women were seen as the one who cooks, cleans, and maintains the house while her husband – the stereotypical breadwinner of the family goes to work and when his long day is done, he comes home to a fresh and hot home cooked meal prepared by his stereotypical housewife. Therefore, commercials were made and there were even television shows that were screened for young women to watch and learn how to be a ‘good housewife’. This norm, however, changed with the rise of feminism.

**Waves of Feminism**

The first wave feminism (1900-1920) focused on securing voting rights for women, challenging the notion of women as passive objects. The 19th Amendment granting suffrage in 1920 marked a significant victory. The second wave feminism (1960-1970) broadened the fight, questioning traditional gender roles and demanding access to male-dominated spheres. It saw the rise of different types of feminism like Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism and Cultural Feminism. The third wave feminism (1990s) emphasized intersectionality, recognizing how race, class, and other factors intertwine with gender oppression. Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality played a key role. The current wave utilizes social media and movements like #MeToo to address sexual harassment and gender-based violence. It also includes LGBTQI+ rights and the fight for transgender recognition.

**Gender Roles Through an Advertising Lens**

“‘The last several decades have seen changes in the role of women in society, both as those who earn money and those who spend money.’” (Sheehan, 2014:89) Not only this, but their power as consumers has also grown in the past few years. Since men and women perceive information differently, naturally, then, advertisements and commercials will be trimmed and curated for both genders specifically. Even though the models appear on television as almost unreal with their glossy hair, clear skin and six pack abs, yet there is a certain understanding that those models pictured in the very same advertisement are the picture of what society believes an individual should look like or would look like if they use their products.
The very same beliefs apply to children’s shows and cartoons alike – a handsome prince who is seen as tall and fair and a princess pictured as an innocent being, or Snow White – ‘the fairest of them all’. Heroes and Villains alike, a stereotype exists and the reason they exist is because society, let alone individuals like us, have allowed them to. Peer pressure runs rampant for children and adolescents alike, so every time a new iPhone or Samsung mobile is released, a new club jersey or pair of sneakers that claim to do wonders to their buyers – young and naive adults believe every word and feel the need to have to fulfil society’s demands of them possessing these expensive items.

But with the onset of the third wave of feminism as mentioned above, people began questioning these stereotypes. Nowadays, appearance is not all that matters for one’s beauty, but one’s physical as well as mental being. Taking examples that hit closer to home, there was a point in time where almost every woman in India became obsessed with Bollywood models and celebrities alike and the fact that they were a walloping size 0. The female notion of a ‘desirable’ body had hit rock bottom. Nowadays however, plus sized models are sought after in order to pose for a more realistic image and allow women to not only accept the body they have but also embrace it entirely.

Men are equally stereotyped by advertisements – they are always pictured in the adverts as the one who signs the insurance papers or is the breadwinner of the family as a doctor, banker and so on – when there are a lot of house husbands and male nurses in existence too. The landscape of women’s representation in advertising has shifted dramatically, while men are still pictured as the ‘macho man’.

Through the use of these non-verbal cues and symbols, advertisers try to portray emotions, feelings and even popular ideas in a very sophisticated manner and are thus able to persuade people into believing what they want them to. In July 2020, Karthik Srinivasan, a communications strategy consultant called out the popular household Indian brand ‘Scotch-Brite’ for its age-old logo of a woman with a bindi. This logo was seen as a gender-marker in a day and age where women are no longer confined to the four walls of their home and men help with household chores alike. Interestingly, to quote Karthik, “While a lint roller does not carry this, other products like scrub pad/sponge, sink brush, broom, bathroom wipe, stainless steel scrub and the toilet brush do carry it.” This is a classic example
of how women are seen through the lens of a household company who after being called out for their error, have promised to replace it.

Conclusion

Many young boys are brought up to believe that ‘big boys don’t cry’ but grown-up men show emotions too and forcing this notion upon young and fragile minds can lead to disastrous consequences later because these children are made to believe that they cannot show any emotion. On the other hand, young girls have heard the phrase ‘girls should be seen, not heard’ all their life, prompting them to believe that they have to be silent and cannot speak up unless spoken to. Contemporary society witnesses a growing movement towards the deconstruction of traditional gender roles and behaviors. This dismantling of established norms manifests in various ways, including the societal acceptance of male emotional expression and the amplification of female voices. Ultimately, these efforts aim to dismantle the metaphorical "glass ceiling" that restricts advancement and shatter the limitations imposed by sexist ideologies.

References


Bionote: Ms. Corrine Rita War, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, St. Mary’s College, Shillong, is currently pursuing her Ph.D at North-Eastern Hill University under the supervision of Prof. D.V. Kumar.
Voices of Resistance: Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Poetry

Karthika S
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Indian Institute of Technology
Dhanbad
Mail ID: karthikasanthosh95@gmail.com

Abstract: Dalit women's poetry is a powerful form of political expression that challenges the caste system and patriarchal structures in India. It gives voice to the experiences of marginalized women, exposing social injustices and demanding social change. Their poetry raises awareness about social issues, fosters community building among Dalit women, and inspires political activism. It disrupts the status quo and demands social change. Touch, the debut poetry collection of Meena Kandasamy, marks a significant entry into contemporary Indian poetry. Published in 2006, this collection offers a poignant exploration of caste, gender, and identity. Kandasamy uses her sharp poetic voice to address the socio-political issues that plague Indian society, particularly focusing on the experiences of Dalits and women. This paper delves into the themes, stylistic elements, and critical reception of Touch, highlighting its impact on modern poetry and social discourse.

Keywords: Dalit Poetry, Political Activism, Caste, Meena Kandaswamy

Feminist literary criticism posits that women's writing occupies a distinct space within the established literary canon. Furthermore, the act of reading and writing by women transcends mere consumption or expression; it becomes a fundamentally political act, particularly evident in the case of Dalit women's poetry. The slogan "the personal is political" captures a core tenet of feminist thought, particularly second-wave feminism. It asserts that women's lived experiences are not isolated but essentially shaped by, and contribute to, broader social and political structures, particularly those concerning gender inequality. Writing by itself becomes inevitable rather than a choice of creative expression.
As stated by Helene Cixous in her polemical essay “The Laugh of Medusa”:

Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (1)

The themes and concerns expressed in the poems of men and women may vary drastically because of the differences in the treatment they receive in society. It is both biological and sociological. We must accept the fact that though men and women belong to the same species ‘Homo Sapiens’, they are different. What women envy is not the penis that the male possesses; they envy the ‘more equal’ treatment the latter receive in the family and society. Women resent the power and agency the male alone gets. More often than not, a regional woman writer who hails from a middle class/lower middle class background faces this crisis even more than a woman who hails from the privileged sections of the society.

Meena Kandasamy is a contemporary Indian poet, writer, and activist whose work is characterized by its fierce commitment to social justice and equality. Her poetry confronts issues such as caste oppression, gender violence, and political injustice, making her a significant voice in the landscape of modern Indian literature. Her early exposure to Tamil literature and Dravidian politics significantly influenced her writing. As an outspoken critic of caste and gender-based discrimination, Kandasamy uses her poetry as a means of protest and empowerment. Her work is a powerful testament to the resilience and resistance of marginalized communities. When we try to identify and place the Tamil Dalit woman poet Meena Kandasamy in the larger cultural and literary milieu of Tamil women writers that includes the poetry of Kutti Revathi, Sukir tharani, Salma and Malathi Maithri, we can very well see a solidarity and sisterhood among these women writers in the treatment of themes like sexuality, casteism, gender identity, nature and female experience.

Meena Kandaswamy’s poems gained wide public attention within a short span of her literary career. She rose to prominence shortly after the publication of her two poetry collections, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010). Besides her poetry collections, she has
also written one novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and a memoir, *When I hit You or The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). The themes of caste annihilation, social exclusion and gender discrimination are the recurrent themes in her writings, particularly in her poetry. She uses language as a means of resistance and proclaims a revolution through poetry. To Kandasamy, a real poet can never escape his/her politics. Shermila Rege, in her essay “Dalit Women talk Differently” states that “the category of Dalit woman is not homogeneous” (45). Kandasamy in many ways tries to break through the conventions of Western Feminism. Though there are commonalities in the forms of suppression and suffering women all over the world have to face, there are differences in the plight when it comes to a doubly or triply marginalized woman. In India, caste plays a crucial role in the condition of the excluded sections of the society. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar rightly points out that “It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set in fashion, and who had the authority to force it on their inferiors” (5.8). The writings of Meena Kandasamy are particularly relevant as a counter-discourse against the hegemonic upper caste narratives. Her poems express her disenchantment with the narratives which propagate a homogeneous brand of nationalism. The disgusting details of assault in the name of caste are played down and given a lofty rhetoric of secularism, democracy and unity in diversity.

Meena Kandasamy considers writing as a tool which can bring freedom to women. She refuses to remain silent, for she believes her silence will be condemned tomorrow. Kandasamy's poetry frequently addresses the brutal realities of caste discrimination in India. Her work often reflects her own experiences as a Dalit woman and her solidarity with oppressed communities. In her poem "Ms. Militancy," she writes, "I was born with a bomb in my mouth," encapsulating the explosive power of her words against systemic injustice (Kandasamy 2010). According to Satyanarayana and Tharu, "Kandasamy's poetry unflinchingly exposes the dehumanizing effects of caste, challenging the reader to confront uncomfortable truths" (Satyanarayana & Tharu 2013). She is in a constant ‘guerilla fight’ with the iniquitous society. Her writings are very autobiographical in nature that stem out of her inner self. Unlearning caste prejudices and making herself casteless were the goals she had before her. She explodes the myth of the upper class/caste as the most heroic and
desirable among the human race by documenting the realities of suppression faced by the outcaste. The despicable and ignominious dimensions of casteism practised by the upper caste are brought to light through these poems of protest. Hindu scriptures abound with a number of commands and instructions to be practised to retain the purity of the community and maintain the caste status quo. Manusmrithi contains a lot of anti-woman and anti-Dalit ideas, to be practised by the caste Hindus, including the pouring of molten lead in the ears of an outcast if he happens to listen to the recital of the Vedas. In the poem “Touch” she exposes the trauma of untouchability. Touch is a feeling cherished by all humans. Touch is one among the five senses through which the emotions and bonding between humans get established but the same touch “When crystallized in caste” forms the basis of hatred and repulsion. She thus says to the practitioners of untouchability:

You will have known
almost Every
knowledgeable thing about
The charms and the
temptations That touch
could hold.

But, you will never have
known That touch – the
taboo

To your
transcendence
When crystallized
in caste Was a
paraphernalia of

Undeserving hate. (Touch 35)

But the same touch does not stop the upper caste man from molesting and raping the Dalit woman to satisfy his lust.

The poems “Shame” and “Narration” discuss the theme of exploitation of women under the shield of caste privileges, which protects the upper caste men alone from shame and misconduct. In “Shame”, Kandasamy says ‘Dalit Girl Raped is much too common
place’, ‘the prying eyes of the public segregate only the victim’, but for the ‘mainstreamed criminals’ ‘caste is a classic shield’. The humiliation caused to the sixteen year old girl and ‘the scars on her wrecked body are a constant reminder’ of the age old ‘disgrace’ and ‘helplessness’. Condolences are recorded only as a formality. The verbal comfort offered to the victim does not solve the real problem. The only solution the girl in the poem finds is to take an ‘elusive purification’ by taking the test of fire – ‘the ancient medicine for shame/ Alas, her death is an irrevocable side effect.’ Concurrently, the upper caste goons go scot free as they belong to the ‘superior caste’. The poem “Narration” is particularly interesting for its scathing criticism of both the men of upper caste and the men of her own community. To be a woman in a patriarchal society is almost equal to belonging to a lower caste. The situation becomes even worse in the case of a Dalit woman who is thrice marginalized and both exploited and sexexploited. Her life and dignity are threatened by the swords of patriarchy that hang above her head. The woman in the poem weeps about the plight of being molested by her landlord and the lecherous gaze of the temple priest that disrobes and defiles her. Untouchability and pollution do not hinder them from satisfying their lust. The most pitiable situation is when she faces the same kind of molestation from her own man:

How can I say anything?
Anything, anything against my own man?

How?

So I take shelter in silence Wear it like a mask, When alone I stumble

Into a flood of incoherencies… (Touch 56)

In “Songs of Summer” she sharply criticizes the patriarchal society for treating women as sexual objects or slaves. The issues that are being dealt with in her poems are multifaceted but at the same time universal. In India alone caste creates an insanity and what we need
right now is sanity; it is the realization “that caste is one of the most insane instruments of discrimination and that casteism is actually a real psychological condition” (Jana 7). Through her poems she tries to make her point that caste exists only in the mind and nowhere else; by annihilating caste from the mind the cruel physical manifestations of untouchability and segregation can be washed off. In “Prayers” an untouchable who has partially recovered from typhoid ‘drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple’ to bow the head in prayers to ‘thank some god’. But this very act of worship was considered an encroachment and the old man was beaten to death with an iron rod. He howled in a feeble voice for a holy intervention in vain, the lifeless god only ‘watched grimly with closed eyes’. To chant prayers is the exclusive privilege of the upper castes and the ‘Dalits die, due to devotion’. She concludes the poem throwing an unanswered question at the readers:

Life teaches: there are different gods at different temples. One solitary thought haunts recollection day and night.

Where did this poor man’s sixty five year old soul go?

To heaven – to join noble martyrs who died for a cause?

Or to hell, where the gods reside, making caste laws? (Touch 57)

For this untouchable old man, caste is more cruel and worse than disease. She questions the blind belief of people who worship a non-existing virtuous god and fail to practise the basic lessons of humanity. In another poem titled “For Sale”, she draws on the irony and hypocrisy of the Brahmins as they allow a Dalit who ‘grows damn rich’ to enter the temple. He ‘buys incense for two bucks’, ‘flowers for five bucks’ and gets ‘extra blessings for twenty bucks’. He is allowed to stand in the front line with the money he possesses. Thus, the whole idea of pollution and untouchability disappears before the person with money power. The upper castes preach the doctrine of non dualism, but in practice they do the reverse. In “Prayers in the Bathroom, overheard”, a Brahmin priest recites a prayer for making the water he takes for bath as pure as the sacred rivers like the Ganga, Jamuna, and Godavari. The prayer is overheard by an untouchable pump operator, who distributes corporation water answers to his prayers in a satirical tone. According to the answers given, the priest keeps on modifying his prayer and in the end when the pump operator reveals his
identity as an untouchable ‘the learned man’ exits the bathroom without taking a shower. Kandasamy says: “After the revelation no one/ in his family takes bath/ They have now placed/ their faith in powerful deodorants” (Touch 82).

For Dalits, in each settlement there is a separate riverbank, they were not allowed to drink or bathe from the reservoir particularly reserved for the upper caste as they believed the food or water touched by a Dalit to be impure. Kandasamy recalls an incident that happened in 1985 in her poem “Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985”. A Dalit woman strongly protested against the buffalo baths in the ponds which was their only source of drinking water. Intolerant upper caste men could not stand her indignation, they avenged her through a series of crimes, violence and rape that led to the Karamchedu massacre where numerous Dalits were killed and women were raped. Ultimately the Dalits are forced to exit and ‘set on a sojourn’ as the father of our nation prescribes. This solution is still consulted as an ‘example’ by the ‘self-seeking politicians’ and results in the ‘Dalit exodus’ and ‘total surrender’. The theorization of Karma and dharma as set by the upper caste puts blame for the fate of the Dalits on the karma of their previous births. It now becomes their dharma to serve the upper caste and suffer the division of labour. The poem “Dignity” is scornful of the ‘Virtuous deeds’ done by their ‘Virtuous fathers’ and asserts the right share of dignity of Dalits:

But, don’t suppress

Our right share of
dignity. It Might even
prove helpful

If you ever
learnt that
virtue.

Though
inherited Was
nothing
beyond The
appearance
Of the
footprint
Of the
bird

On water. (*Touch 43*)

The mainstream historiography usually excludes the material history of sufferings, labour and age old enslavement of the Dalits. They are denied a reliable account of history in the mainstream historiography, which was recorded according to the subjective perception of the upper caste historians. The valuable knowledge systems practised in the field of medicine, agriculture and food culture gets little acknowledgement in society. Dalits are the ‘Unpaid teachers’ in the society. Their contributions in the field of knowledge are neither appreciated nor recognized. “Fleeting” is a poem that exclaims the loss of history, more often than not a ‘destroyed history’. Caste acts like a ‘scheming bulldozer’ that crushes them. The history written by the upper caste only reminds them of their bitter past. The centre – periphery construction often shoots from the power centres, usually occupied by the ‘elite’ minority. The practices, customs and traditions of the elite class get appropriated in the homogeneous cultural history of India but at the same time rule out the variability in the culture. Aggression is a method of breaking silence. The oppressed have risen to rebel against all those segregations. Now, it is time to assert their right to live with dignity. Revolution comes only after aggression and it is only through revolution that freedom could be achieved. Kandasamy, in her poem ‘Aggression’ warns the society about the possible outbreak of an aggression when long silenced dreams explode:

Sometimes,

The outward signals

Of inward struggles takes colossal forms

And the revolution happens because our dreams explode Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting. (*Touch 38*)
Identity and resistance are central to *Touch*. Kandasamy's poems are not just personal reflections but collective voices of resistance against oppression. In "Nailed," she expresses the pain and resilience of marginalized identities: "In my name, in my pain, I am nailed to the cross of caste." This poem evokes the image of crucifixion to highlight the suffering of Dalits, while also suggesting a form of martyrdom and resistance. The poem "Becoming a Brahmin: Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin" is a potent critique of the caste system in India. It uses a satirical and ironic tone to expose the arbitrary and unjust nature of caste hierarchies. The poem takes the form of an "algorithm" or a step-by-step guide, which itself is a satirical take on the idea that one's social status could be altered through prescribed actions. Kandasamy's exploration of identity in *Touch* is a profound assertion of selfhood and defiance against dehumanization.

In “Hymns of a Hag” the poet shows herself to be consumed with revenge towards the upper caste. She fancies herself as a witch killing men whom she despises. She flies to the temple streets to haunt the oppressors and to shave their heads and to cut their ‘holy threads’. She wants to ‘defile them’ and make them bleed and to ‘Dance, rejoice my black, black deed’. The rebellious nature and her aspiration for a social reform again come in the poem “We will Rebuild the Worlds”. The poem hints at the radical reform and revolution the world will witness when the voiceless come to power. She says; “and we will refresh your minds with other histories/of how/ you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples/with the smiling promises of/ heaven in the next birth/ and in this/ a place that/ never belonged”. The histories written by the Dalits will be powerful enough to set right the artificial, constructed histories of the past.

The poems of Meena Kandasamy are poems of revolt and resistance. She questions the absolute narratives and expresses a strong tendency towards self representation of the Dalit woman. Bill Ashcroft’s observation that “marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy” (*The Empire Writes Back* 112) turns out to be particularly true in the case of °Kandasamy. The fact that she is writing in the English language, the language of power and prestige, also adds to the recognition she receives worldwide. *Touch* has received critical acclaim for its bold themes and innovative style. Scholars and critics have praised Kandasamy's ability to articulate the struggles of marginalized communities with
sensitivity and power. The collection has been described as a "landmark in Dalit literature" by Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) and a "significant contribution to feminist poetry" by Gopal (2012).

References


**Bionote:** Karthika S is currently pursuing her Doctoral Research at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Dhanbad. She holds an M.Phil. degree from the Institute of English, University of Kerala. Her research interests lie at the intersection of gender and performance studies, where she explores the nuances and dynamics of these fields in various cultural and social contexts.
Celebrification through Media Spectacles: Emerging Forms of Performativity in Indian Politics

Lakshmi Sukumar
Assistant Professor
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Mail ID: drlakshmisukumar@keralauniversity.ac.in

Abstract: We live at a time when new forms of mediatisation are conditioning the political landscape of India, especially in the context of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in the country. As heat wave conditions prevailed in many parts of the country, the quantity of time spent by politicians for on-ground campaigning was lesser in comparison with earlier elections. The hostile climatic conditions together with the intensity of digital empowerment, access to smartphones and availability of cheap data facilitated the formation of a thriving ecosystem of digital campaigning. The country witnessed political parties using digital spaces to an unprecedented level to inform, influence and even mislead the prospective voters. The focus of the paper will be on the strategic use of social media networks for the current elections in India to transform politicians into celebrities and the acts of performativity choreographed to entice the citizens with media spectacles.

Keywords: Politics, Celebrification, Digital Campaigning, Media Spectacle

Political communication stands out as a rich, complex, and dynamic sub-field within the broader disciplines of Communication Studies and Political Science. Political communication is broadly defined as the transmission of information and messages between political actors, the media, and the public. It involves a range of activities, including public speeches, press conferences, social media engagement, and campaign advertisements. Scholars such as McNair (2011) and Graber (2010) have emphasized the complexity and importance of political communication in shaping public discourse and political outcomes. McNair has contributed an expansive definition to ‘political communication’ which includes “not only verbal or written statements, but also visual means of signification such as dress, make-up,
hairstyle, and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political ‘image’ or identity” (McNair 3). It is an indispensable tool for politicians, influencing every aspect of their careers, from election campaigns to policy advocacy and crisis management. Mastery of communication strategies enables politicians to connect with the public, build support for their initiatives, and navigate the complexities of modern governance.

While the political landscape and communication technologies are mostly in a state of flux, the media serves as an intermediary between politicians and the public, shaping how political messages are crafted, disseminated and consumed. In the intricate tapestry of modern politics, the technological changes in the field of media have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of the print, broadcast and digital media as powerful intermediaries in determining how citizens engage with and understand the political landscape. The earliest forms of discussions on the exchanges between media and politics considered the former as a vital source of information about political actors, policies, and events. Free and independent media also performed the function of a ‘watchdog’ holding governments accountable and exposing corruption or wrongdoing. By holding those in authority accountable through fact-checking, exposing wrongdoing, and shedding light on secretive practices, the media empowers citizens and fosters transparency. Media outlets can also become tools of propaganda, using techniques like selective reporting, emotional appeals, and demonizing opposing viewpoints. The line between media and propaganda can be blurry. While the media aims to inform the public objectively, propaganda deliberately manipulates information to advance a specific agenda. With the emergence of broadcast media and increasing number of television channels, media began to play a greater role in setting the political agenda through news coverage, editorials, and the placement of stories, thereby shaping the public perception of the political agenda.

The history of political communication is a testament to the evolving nature of how political ideas are conveyed and received. From ancient rhetoric to the digital age, each phase has brought new opportunities and challenges for political engagement. The roots of political communication can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where rhetoric and oratory were central to public life. The fifteenth century marked a period of significant
transformation in political communication. This era, characterized by the transition from medieval to early modern Europe, witnessed the advent of new technologies and the changing dynamics of political power. The most notable development was the invention of the printing press, which revolutionized the dissemination of information and played a crucial role in shaping political communication. Prior to the printing press, political communication was primarily conducted through handwritten manuscripts, public speeches, and oral traditions. These methods were slow and limited in reach, restricting the flow of information to a relatively small and elite audience. The printing press democratized access to information by making it possible to distribute political ideas more widely and efficiently. One of the early examples of the impact of print on political communication was the spread of Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1517, which, although slightly outside the fifteenth century, highlights the transformative power of printed materials. Luther's criticisms of the Catholic Church were rapidly disseminated across Europe, sparking the Protestant Reformation and demonstrating how print could be used to mobilize public opinion and challenge established authorities (O’Donnell, 2023). The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of newspapers and periodicals, which became primary vehicles for political communication. Advances in printing technology, such as the steam-powered printing press, reduced the cost of printing and allowed for mass production of newspapers. This made information more accessible to a broader audience, including the burgeoning middle class and increasingly literate working class.

Newspapers played a critical role in disseminating political ideas and information. In colonial contexts, newspapers were often used by both colonial authorities and native populations to promote their respective political agendas. For example, in British India, publications such as the "Bengal Gazette" (founded in 1780) and later, the "Amrita Bazar Patrika" (founded in 1868), became platforms for political debate and critique of colonial policies (Brake and Demoor eds., 2009). Colonial authorities employed various strategies to maintain control and communicate their policies to both European settlers and native populations. Official newspapers and government bulletins were used to propagate the benefits of colonial rule, emphasizing themes such as civilization, economic development, and security. In addition to print media, colonial powers utilized visual propaganda, including posters and public monuments, to reinforce their authority. Public speeches and ceremonies
were also key components of colonial political communication, serving to legitimize colonial rule and foster loyalty among colonial subjects.

The Indian national movement was not just a struggle for independence but also a profound exercise in political communication. As noted by Pramod K. Nayar, "The nationalist press was a site of ideological struggle, where the battle for the minds of the people was fought through words and images" (Nayar 2009). Leaders of the movement employed a variety of communication strategies to mobilize the masses, negotiate with colonial powers, and build a sense of national identity. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was one of the earliest leaders to realize the power of mass communication. His use of newspapers, public speeches, and religious symbolism was instrumental in galvanizing public opinion. Tilak's newspapers, Kesari and Maratha, played a crucial role in spreading nationalist ideas. As noted by historian Stanley Wolpert, "Tilak's fiery editorials in Kesari roused the Marathi-speaking populace to a new sense of national pride and resistance against British rule" (Wolpert 2006). Mahatma Gandhi's communication strategies were perhaps the most sophisticated and impactful. Gandhi's use of simple language, symbols like the spinning wheel, and non-violent resistance resonated deeply with the Indian masses. His publication, Young India, was a platform for articulating his vision and strategies. As Judith Brown observes, "Gandhi's ability to communicate complex ideas in simple terms and his use of symbolic acts were central to his leadership and the success of the movement" (Brown 1989). Jawaharlal Nehru's communication style was marked by his eloquent speeches and writings that articulated a vision of a modern, secular, and democratic India. Nehru's book, Discovery of India, served as a significant medium for communicating his ideas about India's past, present, and future. Nehru's speeches, delivered both in India and internationally, were crucial in garnering support for India's independence. According to biographer Sarvepalli Gopal, "Nehru's speeches were not just political rhetoric but a means to educate and inspire a generation" (Gopal 1975).

Public speeches and mass meetings were another critical medium of political communication. Leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose used these platforms to connect with the masses, mobilize support, and convey their messages. These gatherings were often characterized by a sense of unity and collective purpose. As described by Bipan
Chandra, "Mass meetings during the national movement were more than political rallies; they were moments of collective affirmation and resolve" (Chandra 1989). Symbols played a significant role in the Indian national movement. The spinning wheel, the tricolor flag, and slogans like "Swaraj" (self-rule) were powerful tools of non-verbal communication. These symbols transcended linguistic and cultural barriers, creating a shared sense of identity and purpose. According to Richard J. Barnett, "The use of symbols in the Indian national movement was a masterstroke in political communication, making abstract ideas tangible and relatable" (Barnett 1969).

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has experienced profound transformations in its political communication landscape. In the immediate post-independence period, newspapers were the primary medium of political communication in India. Major newspapers like "The Times of India," "The Hindu," and "The Indian Express" played critical roles in shaping public opinion and political discourse. These publications provided a platform for political leaders to articulate their visions, policies, and critiques. The Indian government recognized the importance of communication in nation-building and development. The establishment of the Press Information Bureau (PIB) facilitated the dissemination of official information and government policies. The PIB's role in managing government communication helped ensure that the public was informed about state initiatives and developmental programs. Radio emerged as a powerful medium of political communication in the 1950s, with All India Radio (AIR) becoming the primary broadcaster. AIR played a crucial role in reaching rural and remote areas, disseminating information about government policies, agricultural practices, health, and education. Television broadcasting began in India in the late 1950s, but it was in the 1980s that Doordarshan, the national television network, gained widespread popularity. Doordarshan became a key medium for political communication, providing news, educational programs, and cultural content. Television brought political events into people's homes, making politics more accessible and engaging. The broadcast of parliamentary proceedings and political debates helped enhance transparency and accountability. Doordarshan also played a significant role in covering elections, providing extensive coverage of campaigns, rallies, and results. The economic liberalization of the early 1990s marked a turning point in India's media landscape. The liberalization policies led to the proliferation of private television channels, radio stations,
and newspapers. This media expansion increased competition and diversity in political communication. Private news channels like NDTV, CNN-IBN, and Zee News emerged as influential players, providing 24/7 news coverage and in-depth political analysis. The growth of private media introduced new dynamics in political reporting, with greater emphasis on investigative journalism, live coverage, and diverse viewpoints.

The late 20th century witnessed the rise of the internet, ushering in a new era of political communication. Websites, blogs, and online news portals offered new platforms for political discourse. The advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in the early 21st century revolutionised political communication. Political parties and leaders began using social media to engage directly with the electorate, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The use of social media was particularly evident in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, where political parties employed targeted digital campaigns to reach voters. Campaigns now employ data analytics and voter segmentation to tailor messages to specific demographics, enhancing the effectiveness of political communication.

In this hyper-mediatised world with mediascapes constructing and controlling narratives, people resort to the media to be informed of politicians and political issues. Social media, traditional media outlets, and a constant news cycle have made media teams an indispensable arm of every political party. These teams play a crucial role in shaping public perception, mobilising supporters, and ultimately, winning elections.

As the political landscape witnesses an abundance of diverse media platforms, politicians have to master the art of ‘mediascaping,’ weaving their message through this intricate tapestry of communication. “Much as a landscape invites a concept of landscaping, today a mediascape demands a concept of mediascaping. Mediascapes should not be considered as an enduring reality, but a continuing process of Grafting space by media and as media” (Casetti 40). Though traditionally defined as those wielding direct or indirect influence on the political system, the term ‘political actors’ take on a new dimension in this paper. The discussion extends that meaning to the world of ‘acting’ to highlight the performative nature of media engagements by politicians. “Politics is a communicative practice, requiring embodied subjects who can perform and engage in speech acts in a domain that is public, where others can witness and freely respond to those performances and
speech acts” (Craig 2016). The concept of politicians as embodied subjects highlights the significance of their physical presence, appearance, and non-verbal communication in the political sphere. This approach emphasises that political influence is not solely exercised through policies and speeches, but also through the physicality and personal presentation of the politicians themselves. Effective embodiment strategies can enhance a politician's ability to engage and persuade the public. The digital age immerses us in a deluge of images turning visual rhetoric into an indispensable part of political communication. With the accentuated penetration of internet, increasing popularity of social media pages and ever-growing number of television channels, “political actors—both established politicians and those attempting to subvert or counter the established political order continue to deploy visual rhetoric both for constructing and popularising their own respective narratives, ideas and ideologies” (Vincent 103).

The world of imaging and politics is a powerful and complex one. Images can be incredibly powerful tools for conveying a message. Politicians and media outlets use photos, videos, and staged events to create a specific narrative about themselves, their opponents, and the issues. The strategically constructed images evoke strong emotions that engineer the social imaginary. “Politics will eventually be replaced by imagery. The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favour of his image, because the image will be much more powerful than he could ever be” (Pisch 1). Digital communication platforms afford the meticulous construction of imagery and videography that project a curated persona of the politician, potentially fostering a cult of personality around the person. As we delve deeper into the nuances of politics as performance, we come across interesting examples that reflect on the mediated forms of a personality cult and celebrity culture in the political arena. Jan Plamber’s definition of personality cult as the “godlike glorification of a modern political leader with mass medial techniques and excessive popular worship for this leader” (Plamber 33) and Max Weber’s reference to charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least especially exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber 241) help us theoretically engage with the mediatised forms of political performances choreographed to entice citizens across social segments. In this emerging political culture, the politician conceptualises oneself as a ‘celebrity’ as seen in the world of cinema. According to Daniel Boorstin, “the
celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin 58). He further adds that “the hero is distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media (61).

The contemporary political landscape is undergoing a transformation marked by celebritification. Celebritification refers to the processes by which individuals or entities are transformed into celebrities through self-branding, resulting in the celebritization of the domain. This transformation involves gaining significant public attention, recognition, and influence through various means of media exposure and strategic self-presentation. The process of celebritification is multifaceted and is leveraged by politicians for optimum results. Most political parties currently have professional media teams composed of communication experts, media strategists, social media managers, and public relations professionals, which are essential for managing a party's interaction with the public, the press, and digital platforms. One of the major ways of their intervention is to curate visual and textual narratives to construct ‘media spectacles’ to package politicians into commodities for mass consumption.

The 21st century Indian political sphere presents a fertile ground to study the formation of ‘celebrity politician’, characterized by the accrual of celebrity status to politicians through the strategic deployment of media spectacles. The term "media spectacle" refers to the phenomenon where events, personalities, and issues are amplified and sensationalized by the media, transforming them into spectacles that captivate public attention. This concept is closely related to the work of theorists such as Guy Debord, who in his seminal work The Society of the Spectacle, argued that modern societies are increasingly dominated by images and representations that obscure reality (Debord, 1994). Media spectacles often employ sensationalist techniques to dramatize events and attract audiences. As John Fiske argues, "The power of the spectacle lies in its ability to create a dramatic narrative that resonates with the audience's emotions and imaginations" (Fiske 45). The visual nature of media spectacles is crucial in capturing attention. The influence of media spectacles on political discourse is particularly notable. Sensationalist coverage of political events can amplify partisan divides and shape voter attitudes. According to Fiske, "The
spectacle of politics often overshadows substantive policy discussions, focusing public attention on the drama of political conflict" (Fiske 53).

While the existing discussions on celebritification of politicians largely focused on the construction and dissemination of media spectacles during election campaigns, the 2024 Lok Sabha election in India marked a significant turning point in the use of media spectacles through the hyperreal images of politicians and political events circulated through the digitalscapes much before the formal declaration of elections. In September 2023, India hosted the 18th G20 summit with much fanfare and extensive media coverage. A significant number of images of the summit included large images of our Prime Minister on hoardings and cut-outs placed at different locales proximate to the respective venue and these images also enjoyed circulation on the online platforms as well. The venue at New Delhi named Bharat Mandapam stood on 123 acres of land and was built at an expense of Rs. 2700 crores. The Mandapam by itself acted as a spatial constellation of select artefacts from our history with our Prime Minister strategically waiting in front of a giant Konark wheel to greet world leaders (PMO India 2023). The entire city was also dotted with replicas of Ashok Chakra, cutouts of Mahatma Gandhi and Charka and models of the wheel and sculptures of dancing women at the Konark Sun Temple. The venue was a real architectural marvel with physical and virtual exhibitions enhancing the immersive experiences of the participants. With the arrival of the world leaders together with the exhibitions and cultural performances shared on digital platforms, the entire summit was well-curated as a media spectacle to impress viewers across the globe. Designated as India's "new Infra Marvel" (Jagota, 2023), the Bharat Mandapam exemplified the successful integration of vanguard technological advancements with traditional architectural motifs and religious icons including an 8 metre bronze statue of Nataraja. The G20 meetings held across 60 Indian cities were also planned effectively to highlight the image of the Prime Minister through his pictures on most of the hoardings. Moreover, the G20 logo with the images of planet earth and lotus flower with the tagline ‘vasudhaiva kudumbakam’ also subtly reminded one of the ruling dispensation.

Thus the one year of India’s presidency of G20 was used as an avenue for political advertising and was defined by the personality cult propagated by the Prime Minister (Krishnan and Suhasini 2023). While the G20 summit offered a fertile platform for the Prime
Minister to engage in “the orchestrated adulation and cult building” (Ninan 2023), his visit to Lakshadweep in January 2024 was yet another visual spectacle that went viral. While the apparent purpose of the videos depicting the Prime Minister traversing Lakshadweep’s beaches may have been to promote the island's status as a premier tourist destination, a deeper analysis suggests a strategic attempt to construct a singular visual narrative centred exclusively on the Prime Minister's persona. “Pictures of him walking on the white beaches and snorkelling in its crystal-clear waters were uploaded on his official account on X (formerly Twitter) and his YouTube channel, garnering hundreds of thousands of views” (Doshi 2024). Employing meticulously choreographed sequences and utilizing state-of-the-art camera techniques, the videos elevated the Prime Minister's image to resemble a celebrity endorsement, simultaneously promoting both his persona and the Lakshadweep as a tourist destination (Business Today 2024). The strategic orchestration of the Prime Minister's visual narrative employed a confluence of elements: a color palette harmonizing with the seascape, a carefully curated portrayal of pensive relaxation, a symbolic embrace of technology through staged use of a digital device, and finally, snorkeling footage projecting an adventurous persona for a youthful audience. This meticulously constructed imagery culminated in the potential cultivation of a cult-like image and the elevation of the Prime Minister to a celebrity status.

The phenomenon of redefining politics as performance has transcended the boundaries of specific political parties. The examples from Kerala and West Bengal ruled by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) respectively reinforce the deepening of celebrity culture and personality cult in politics in India. The government of Kerala celebrated ‘Kerala Priavi’ (birth of Kerala) with great pomp and show, extending the celebration to a week, from 01 to 07 November 2023, under the title ‘Keralaleeyam.’ Promoted as the ‘Grand Festival of Kerala’ (Keralathinte Mahotsavam) with the tagline ‘My Kerala, My Pride’ (Ente Keralam, Ente Abhimanam), most of the posters and hoardings of the event invariably carried a picture or name of the Chief Minister (Kerala Kaumudi 2023), using them as synonyms of the state. Noted historian, Ramachandra Guha had warned about the dangers of personality cult in politics during his session in the DC Books literary festival held in January 2023 (Kabani 2023). In the course of his session, “he quoted the examples of Mamta Banerjee, West Bengal; Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi; and Pinarayi
Vijayan, Kerala” as examples of cult personalities emerging in different parts of the country. The Keraleeyam festival exemplified this along with the attribution of a celebrity status to the Chief Minister. The larger presence of film actors and celebrities from the world of art ensured a visual treat scripting a seamlessness between the world of politics and art (SoSouth 2023). The festival was curated with a variety of performances and exhibitions to construct a grand media spectacle commodifying the landscape and culturalscape.

Mirroring controversies that often plague political events, the festival was mired in debate regarding the expenditure involved as the state was grappling with a substantial debt burden. Yet another deeper allegation was against the Aadimam Living Museum, an initiative by the Kerala Folklore Academy derided as “human zoo” by activists and criticised by K Radhakrishnan, Minister for Welfare of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes as it included a display of indigenous people as exhibits (John 2023). Keraleeyam was followed by ‘Nava Kerala Sadas’, an outreach programme of the government with the Chief Minister and the entire cabinet visiting the 14 districts in a luxury bus, earning the sobriquet “Cabinet-on-wheels” (Philip 2023). The news reports of the inaugural ceremony of the programme carried images of the Chief Minister and all the cabinet ministers being welcomed by adorning them with a traditional headgear (Mathrubhumi 2023). Kerala Sadas could also be read as an attempt to construct a populist narrative about the government for mass consumption. The posters and ads of this programme also included an enlarged image of the Chief Minister with disproportionately smaller photos of the rest of the ministers (Nava Kerala Sadas 2023). Another image that was widely circulated was the one showing the larger image of the Chief Minister (CM) evolving out of the geographical map of Kerala, reflecting the new definition of the state centred around the personality cult of its CM (Behance). To cap it all was the release of an 8 minute video song of "Kerala CM", a tribute to Pinarayi Vijayan directed by Nishanth Nila (Saj Production House). The lyrics of the song were unabashedly hagiographic, providing another reason for scholars to critique the ‘new turn’ in Left politics. In the words of Nissim Mannathukaren, Professor, International Development Studies, Dalhousie University, Canada “The Left is also set back further by the development of authoritarian tendencies, and a personality cult around Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. This is unprecedented in Kerala, and in the Indian Left who practise
collective leadership along with institutionalised processes for internal democracy” (Mannathukaren 2024).

Mamata Banerjee, CM of West Bengal has also displayed tendencies towards building a personality cult. “One of the major changes she brought to Bengal politics is that of a personality cult. The Left was all about collective leadership, while Congress also had its own bureaucracy” (Bhattacharya 2024). She has captured media attention with the selection of candidates for TMC from the glamour world to stand for elections. According to political observer Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, “When TMC’s upward mobility started in 2009, more actors, singers, and glamor joined the fray. Mamata always trusted celebrities in difficult seats where she couldn’t find a suitable candidate” (Kissu 2024). Together with her attempts to leverage the glitz and glamour of the artistic world, she created a media sensation as she “walked on a pair of cross ramps with 42 party nominees to introduce them to party workers and supporters, who had assembled at the Brigade parade grounds for the Jono Garjan rally” (Chakraborty).

The 2024 Lok Sabha election witnessed a conspicuous trend towards the incorporation of celebrity culture, the cultivation of personality cults around political figures, and the strategic deployment of media spectacles. However, the election results were a huge blow to the faith of the political parties on media spectacles. The political systems, especially NDA and LDF, failed to garner the kind of overwhelming victory they expected at the hustings. The election results offered a new revelation to the parties - verbal and visual rhetorics alone do not always help in blinding the voters to the structural issues in social and economic development. However, the nexus between media and politics will only turn deeper with the emergence of AI and deep fakes, further complicating the nature of political discourses.

References


“Nava Kerala Sadas - Transforming Kerala Together | Nava Kerala Sadas.” Nava Kerala Sadas, navakeralasadaskayamkulam.online.


**Bionote:** Dr. Lakshmi Sukumar is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. Her doctoral research was on Kerala Studies. She has been teaching in various Higher Education institutions under the Directorate of Collegiate Education, Government of Kerala since 2007. She was the Director of the Centre for Women’s Studies, University of Kerala from 2018-2020. Her areas of interest are Critical Theories, Media Studies and Legal Studies.