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Women's Initiatives

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Editorial

The June-December 2024 number of *Samyukta* is an experiment of sorts. Seven young scholars, who have proved their mettle as Interns in Samyukta Research Foundation (SRF) were invited to contribute to this number. The papers they submitted were aligned with the ongoing discussions in cultural theory at SRF.

Salomi J Kottoor submitted an original paper on meta-theoretical explorations of Cultural Memory Studies, drawing examples from Devaki Nilayangode's 2011 memoir, *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*. It was indeed a challenging exercise to gain clarity on how to undertake a meta-theoretical reading and I must say Salomi accomplishes this with consummate elan.

This paper is followed by three papers on performance and performativity authored by Alina Joseph, A. Sreelakshmi and Archa Suresh respectively. The first of this triad, by Alina Joseph, explores the embodied politics of the dance of Chandralekha, a pioneering figure in contemporary Indian dance. Alina's sensitive reading of both the politics and the poetics of Chandralekha's oeuvre is a fine addition to the field of Performance Studies. Next we have an incisive reading of the recent Malayalam movie, *Bramayugam* by A. Sreelekshmi. Film Studies has now emerged as one of the important focal points in the understanding of thoughts, emotions and experiences. Sreelekshmi analyses the subtle interplay of caste, class and hegemonic masculinity in the movie, drawing from contemporary theoretical insights that have relevance across cultures. An informed reading of gendered censorship, both direct and indirect, in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi* by Archa Suresh delves into the intricacies of representation on OTT platforms. I would say that it was a daring attempt as Archa worked on this paper even as *Heeramandi* was being aired. Critically analysing shifting agency and cultural appropriation with the aid of current readings on popular culture, Archa's paper invites readers to novel ways of appreciating the bold and the unconventional in screen space.

All the papers selected for this number foreground ways of reading that are new and fresh. I believe the younger generation of scholars are equipped with a rare sensibility to challenge stereotypes and spot the not so familiar. Moving beyond the borders of India, Varada P Nair

reads *Afterlives* that covers decades in the lives of its three main characters, Khalifa, Afiya and Ilyas. Varada chooses to study this master narrative by Abdulrazak Gurnah, employing the theoretical premises of Hope Theory. One cannot of course wish away the sterling insights of Postcolonial or Feminist positions at this point of time. But Varada teases out the spectrum of hope in the lives of the deprived and the downtrodden, giving them hope to move on. This is a unique attempt and paves the way to re-read many age-old classics.

To continue the discourse on memory that runs through this number, Anna Thomas visits selected narratives on the civil war in Sri Lanka. As distinct from the staid retellings of war, violence and displacement, Anna discusses the concept of 'replaced memory' through three different types of memory - haptic, iconic and olfactory. These elements are deeply embedded in human memory; they lie dormant until triggered to life by an unsuspected event. Anna reinvents the term 'replaced memory' introduced by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "as a singular idea that will serve as a crucial tool in the exploration of memory as an act of survival and identity formation."

This number of *Samyukta* concludes with a review article of the 2021 Pixar animated movie, *Luca*. Though not explicitly spelt out, the article examines the role of memory in constructing and reinforcing binaries in the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality. Athulya goes on to discuss "queering the gaze" to "challenge the rigidity of normative structures", including that of live-action cinema. This reinforces "the potential of animation as a queer medium", a singular insight shared by Athulya. Though presented as a Review Article, Athulya's writing has the gravitas of a research paper.

The field of scholarship is changing at the speed of light at the moment. It is the mandate of a research publication to keep track of the major shifts in theory and praxis. We also take it upon ourselves the task of identifying and projecting emerging talents. We are certain that the team of seven scholars showcased in this number would aspire to reach the pinnacle of excellence in their fields.

G. S. Jayasree

31 December 2024

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Mapping Cultural Memory: A Metatheoretical Exploration of the Field Through Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*

Salomi J Kottoor

Abstract: The research is a unique attempt to analyse the theoretical framework of Cultural Memory Studies, conceptualised in the early 20th century by Maurice Halbwachs. This framework explores the reciprocal relationship between culture and memory, contextualising individual memory within a broader cultural context. Memories of the past shape our perception of the present, highlighting the importance of detailed study. The scope of this emerging field is examined through Devaki Nilayamgode's 2011 memoir, *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*, which explores her lived experiences and the circumscribed lives of the *Antharjanams.* By focusing on specific examples from Nilayamgode's memories, the research aims to understand the socio-cultural landscape of early 20th-century Kerala. The study employs metatheoretical analysis and hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to investigate Cultural Memory Studies and the personal experiences of Namboodiri women during the pre-independence period in Kerala, as well as the transformations over time. This research underscores the critical role of cultural memory in shaping societal narratives and contributes to the broader understanding of historical and cultural dynamics.

Keywords: *Cultural Memory Studies, individual memory, collective memory, Devaki Nilayamgode, memoir, Namboodiri women, Kerala*

Memory, which is a seemingly personal faculty, extends beyond the self to interconnect a diverse array of shared experiences. Cultural Memory Studies explores this intricate interplay, analysing how societies remember the past, how the past shapes the present, and how memory itself is a dynamic process constantly constructed and reconstructed within social and cultural contexts. This paper lays the groundwork for a metatheoretical analysis of the field, utilising Devaki Nilayamgode's powerful memoir, *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*, as a case study for examining the key concepts.

Cultural Memory Studies investigates the complex relationship between culture and memory. The traditions, beliefs, and practices that make up a culture determine how individuals and groups remember and interpret their past. Conversely, the memories of a community's past can shape their cultural identity, informing how communities understand themselves, their history, and their place in the world. This reciprocal relationship forms the foundation of Cultural Memory Studies and provides a deeper understanding of how societies construct narratives of the past that influence their present and future. Cultural Memory Studies is an emerging field of study which draws contributions from various disciplines across the globe. The field thrives on interdisciplinary exchange between theories developed and scholarship emerging from multiple countries, enriching our understanding of how diverse cultures remember and grapple with their pasts.

The foundational concept of Cultural Memory Studies is the notion that the past is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic space continually reinterpreted and reshaped through social and cultural processes. This view questions the traditional approaches that emphasise the objective construction of past events. Cultural Memory Studies acknowledge the inherent

subjectivity of memory, recognising that the past is not simply "remembered" but actively constructed and reconstructed through cultural practices, narratives, and media representations.

Cultural Memory Studies originated in 1990s Germany, a nation confronting the legacy of the Nazi regime. The task of forging a new national identity in the post-war era drove the country to critically examine memory and its role in shaping national identity. Scholars who were aware of the dwindling number of direct witnesses to the Holocaust sought alternative modes of preserving historical memory and comprehending how societies engage with their past. This urgent need led to the development of theoretical frameworks that explore how communities select and utilise past events to shape their collective identity (Pethes viii).

While the initial impetus for the theories of Cultural Memory Studies emerged in the German context, the core concepts also crossed the borders of other nations. Similar processes of cultural memory construction occurred in various societies around the world. Whether grappling with the colonial past, social upheavals, or traumatic events, communities across the globe engage in acts of remembering their past, which shape their understanding of the present.

While memory is a central concept across various disciplines, Cultural Memory Studies offers a distinct perspective. Unlike disciplines that focus on individual cognitive processes, Cultural Memory Studies delves into the cultural dimensions of memory. It explores the social, historical, philosophical, and artistic aspects of memory, examining how societies remember the past across different contexts. This allows scholars to study the complex relationship between cultural narratives and historical realities.

Cultural Memory Studies is a multifaceted field that defies rigid categorisation. It can be simultaneously transdisciplinary, integrating insights from various disciplines; multidisciplinary, where different disciplines maintain autonomy while contributing their unique perspectives; and interdisciplinary, fostering collaboration and cross-pollination of

ideas across disciplines. This holistic approach allows for a richer understanding of cultural memory (Erll 3).

It is this emphasis on interdisciplinarity that serves as one of the defining characteristics of cultural memory studies. The field recognises that memory is a multifaceted concept, requiring diverse methodologies and perspectives from sociology, anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, art, media studies, and even neuroscience to contribute to this rich tapestry. This collaborative approach fosters a nuanced understanding of how memory is shaped, transmitted, and mediated through various cultural forms and processes.

Methodology

This research employs a dual methodological approach, integrating metatheoretical analysis and hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. The metatheoretical analysis critically examines the framework of cultural memory studies, tracing its historical development and fundamental concepts. This involves a detailed review of relevant literature to contextualise the framework within a broader academic discourse.

The study simultaneously utilises the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to interpret the lived experiences and cultural contexts depicted in Devaki Nilayamgode's memoir. This approach involves a detailed analysis of the text, focusing on instances that highlight how individual memories and collective cultural narratives are constructed and reconstructed. This paper combines these methodologies to provide a unique analysis of the theoretical framework, supported by empirical examples from the memoir, offering a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between theory and lived experience.

The author uses Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman* as a powerful lens through which the key concepts in Cultural Memory Studies are examined. Nilayamgode's evocative memoir rises above her personal recollections of the

different phases of her life by reflecting the collective memories of the Namboodiri community and the transformative journey it underwent. However, in order to fully understand the implications of the interdependency of culture and memories, it is imperative to thoroughly explore the field of Memory Studies and how it differs from Cultural Memory Studies.

Memory studies

Memory studies uses memory as a dynamic instrument for interaction with the past. Memory studies encompasses a diverse field of inquiry that investigates memory processes at both individual and collective levels. Therefore, it includes both personal and public acts of remembrance. It is an interdisciplinary scholarly field that examines how memories function, how they are shaped, and how they impact individuals and societies. Memory is multifaceted and cannot be fully realised within the confines of a single discipline. Scholars in the field explore how memories shape identities, narratives, and our understanding of historical events. Memory is a concept central to multiple academic disciplines spanning the sciences and social sciences. Memory studies predominantly explore individualistic memory.

For instance, for a historian, the act of recounting past events or personalities is akin to reviving memories from a long time ago. However, historians grapple with their subjectivity while examining evidence from the past. Even in their pursuit of factual accuracy, their interpretations remain influenced by personal biases, cultural context, and individual perspectives. Thus, the act of constructing historical narratives inherently involves subjectivity, shaping how we understand the past. Hayden White, a historical theorist, emphasised historical accounts' narrative nature. A historian, according to White, does not discover a narrative. The narrative is constructed by selecting and arranging the past events in an order the historian prefers (Carroll 134). Although historical writing is supported by evidential records from the

past, the same event can be interpreted differently depending on the author's perspective (Roediger and Wertsch 12).

When it comes to fiction writing, individual memories play a crucial role. When crafting characters and events, novelists draw upon their own memories and knowledge from past experiences. Memoir, on the other hand, is a genre that combines memory with storytelling. It involves an individual recounting their own life experiences, often focusing on specific events, emotions, and personal reflections. While individual memory is an internal cognitive process, memoir externalises and shapes memory through narrative. The memoir contains a blend of facts and fiction, allowing the author to create a cohesive narrative that captures emotional truths beyond mere factual accuracy. The act of writing a memoir involves remembering, revising, and altering facts to construct a truth that resonates with the author's identity. Memoirists become both creators and critics of their own experiences (Gatenby). Devaki Nilayamgode's powerful memoir, *Antharjanam: Memories of a Namboodiri Woman,* offers a unique glimpse into her life and the changing world of the Namboodiri community. Nilayamgode's work rises beyond personal experience, becoming a valuable social document. Her storytelling recollects a bygone era, shedding light on the lives of Namboodiri women and the *Anaacharams* they were subjected to. While focusing on the lives of the women of her community, Nilayamgode also critiques the rigid beliefs and traditions practised within the community.

The concept of 'memory' has been extensively studied through various models. One of the earliest models used to study memory was proposed by Serbo-Croatian writer Danilo Kiš in his story called "Encyclopedia for the Dead." Here, he refers to the individualistic nature of memory associated with one's own past. This model was called the 'original plenitude and subsequent loss model' as it involved looking at memory as something that was fully formed

in the past (Rigney 12). Even though this model conceptualises memory as a storehouse of original experiences, the inter-generational transmission of memories results in losing parts of it. Maurice Halbwachs, one of the pioneers in the field of cultural memory studies, was informed by the 'original plenitude and subsequent loss' model. Memory, as presented by Halbwachs, is kept alive by individuals who have either lived through the experience or gained knowledge of that experience through someone else. Despite the inherent brevity of the human lifespan, recording experiences through written narratives and transmitting these narratives across generations enables the preservation of memories. Fixing memories in the written medium externalises the 'lived' or 'internal' memory.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in memory, particularly in how people remember the past. This focus extends beyond the traditional narratives provided by professional historians. Instead, it encompasses what is often referred to as a "counter-memory." Counter-memory represents alternative perspectives on the past, challenging dominant historical narratives and giving voice to groups that have been marginalised or excluded from mainstream history.

The social-constructivist model is an alternative model of memory that suggests that memories of a shared past are actively constructed and reconstructed in the present (Rigney 14). The path toward a social constructivist approach has been paved by the recent emergence of the concept of 'cultural memory'. The work of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann has been pivotal in shaping the concept of cultural memory. Memories of the past are not individual recollections but are shaped by various forms, such as storytelling (mediation), turning oral or experiential narratives into written or symbolic forms (textualisation), conversations, rituals, performances, and artistic representations.

Jan Assmann distinguished between two phases of memory: communicative memory and cultural memory. The former is related to everyday life and social interaction, encompassing memories that are circulated among participants and eyewitnesses while they are still alive. The second phase, cultural memory, transcends individual lifetimes, including memories that persist even after the participants and eyewitnesses are no more. This type of memory is essential for understanding a society's historical, cultural, and mythical context.

Cultural Memory Studies

In simpler terms, this field examines how culture and memory are interconnected. Cultural Memory Studies is a globally recognised field with significant contributions from various countries, including France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Canada, the United States, and the Netherlands. The primary definition of cultural memory as the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts forms the basis of Cultural Memory Studies (Erll 1). Cultural Memory theories exist in specific contexts. They investigate the link between the present and the past through memory theories. Simultaneously, as cultural theories, they consider the characteristics and shared experiences of larger communities, like families, societies, and countries (Pethes vii). The cultural and historical points of reference are variable as they are not fixed. This is because society and its culture are in a perpetual state of change.

Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist, pioneered the study of collective memory, an essential aspect of cultural memory studies. Through a series of three influential books, he elaborated on the critical notions of cultural memory studies. His journey began in 1925 with *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* ("Social Frameworks of Memory"), where he argued that social structures shape how we remember. This challenged the prevailing views on memory as purely individual, championed by Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. Halbwachs' proposal that even personal memories are fundamentally 'collective memories' sparked debates.

Halbwachs spent over fifteen years refining his magnum opus, *La mémoire collective* ("The Collective Memory"), which was his second book on cultural memory studies. This book was published posthumously in 1950. Before this, Halbwachs published another book, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte* ("The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land"), which served as a concrete example of how memory functions within specific locations. Today, his theories are considered foundational within the field of cultural memory studies.

Three key areas emerged from Halbwachs' analysis of Cultural Memory Studies: he emphasised how social structures influence individual memories; he recognised the role of mnemonic communities like families in shaping and transmitting memories; and he also expanded the concept of collective memory to encompass cultural transmission and traditional building.

The theory of Cultural Memory Studies emerged in Germany during the 1990s, coinciding with the country's reunification and the subsequent process of national self-definition (Pethes). The urgency to grapple with the memory of the Nazi regime and redefine German identity in the post-war era served as a critical catalyst for this theoretical development. The theory arose from the observation that direct witnesses of the Holocaust were dwindling, necessitating alternative modes of preserving historical memory. It aimed to provide a framework for understanding how societies select and utilise past events to shape their collective identity and self-image. Even though the German context influenced the initial focus, the core concept of cultural memory transcends national boundaries, and similar processes of cultural memory construction occur in various societies.

Cultural Memory Studies is multifarious, reflecting a rich and complex character. It can be transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary simultaneously. Cultural Memory

Studies transcends disciplinary boundaries and integrates insights from various fields, avoiding confinement to any discipline. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of culture and memory as scholars collaborate across disciplines. Thus, Cultural Memory Studies is a transdisciplinary field. As a multidisciplinary field, different disciplines contribute independently to cultural memory studies. Each field brings its own unique methodologies and perspectives and enriches the field's terminology. Cultural Memory Studies is a field that relies on interdisciplinary cooperation. Memory is a concept crucial to many disciplines and forms the core of this broad field. Unlike a single discipline, Cultural Memory Studies draws from various fields, including sociology, anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, art, media studies, and neuroscience (Erll 1).

This exploration of the intricate link between culture and memory allows researchers to build a strong foundation of memory across disciplines. Cultural Memory Studies is a field in which various disciplines contribute their methodologies and perspectives. This fosters a wealth of terminology. This field's inception acknowledges that successfully exploring cultural memory necessitates collaboration among different disciplines. This focus on interdisciplinary exchange has led to collaborations, with some of the most impactful studies in cultural memory arising from exchanges between media studies and cultural history.

What makes the field distinct?

The concept of individual memory pervades various academic disciplines spanning the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. In the realm of psychology, the individual memory process takes centre stage. Within empirical psychology, psychologists investigate individual memory through diverse phenomena, including narrative memory, flashbulb memory, déjà vu experiences, eyewitness recollections, and memories associated with traumatic events like rape and war. This field examines various memory-related aspects,

including age-related changes, collective memory within social groups, interpersonal influences on recollection, and memory dynamics during psychotherapy. Educational psychology explores the interplay between learning and memory. Neuroscientists characterise individual memory as a biological process involving brain networks and other psychological systems. A behavioural neuroscientist's definition of memory is different from a cognitive psychologist's description of memory. The concept of memory undergoes nuanced variations across disciplines such as neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, clinical psychology, and forensic psychology. Thus, even within the natural sciences, the definition and characteristics of individual memory exhibit variability (Roediger and Wertsch).

Meanwhile, Cultural Memory Studies focus on the cultural dimensions of memory. The social, historical, philosophical, and artistic aspects of memory are considered in cultural memory. This emerging field explores the relationships between the past and the present across different contexts. Scholars from sociology, history, literature, media studies, and related disciplines contribute to this endeavour.

Fundamental Notions in Cultural Memory Studies

The dialectics between culture and memory provide a fascinating lens through which we can examine the interplay of the past, present, and future. Cultural memory shapes collective identity and informs current actions. This dialectical perspective underscores the evolving nature of memory over time, emphasising both remembering and forgetting as essential components in shaping cultural narratives. In simpler terms, memory is not static; it undergoes evolution over time. Memory also varies across distinct cultures. Therefore, culture and memory are dependent on each other. Thus, cultural memory, influenced by historical events, impacts our perception of identity and the trajectory of culture over time.

Devaki Nilayamgode's book *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman* provides instances that illuminate the concepts in cultural memory studies. Devaki, a member of the Malayali Brahmin community, recounts her life experiences from childhood to adulthood in her memoir, which also reflects the community's transformative journey. Devaki's memoir goes beyond her personal memories; it encompasses the collective memories of the socio-cultural community and the changes it underwent. The enduring impact of her work on both individual and social history is significant, a significance that will make you appreciate the weight of its influence. Her upbringing in the loveless, dimly lit Namboodiri household in central Kerala shaped her experiences. The book comprises Devaki's earlier works, *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yaathra: Kaattilum Naattilum,* organised in a linear, chronological, and thematic manner. Devaki Nilayamgode's memoir depicts figures that were not isolated; instead, they pervaded her social and cultural reality. In that light, some concepts from Cultural Memory Studies can be examined using examples from Nilayamgode's memoir. When constructing a framework for cultural memory studies, it becomes essential to delve into conceptual aspects.

Individual memory

Individual memory is the first level at which culture and memory intersect. Individual memory involves the cognitive process of remembering that occurs within an individual's brain (Erll 5). Individual memories, in simpler words, refer to an individual's recollections of their past experiences. They are internal and mostly spring from the lived memories or first-hand experiences of the individual. In that sense, individual memories are tied to the individual's lifespan. However, in the context of cultural memory studies, individual memories do not exist in isolation. Individual memories are shaped by the cultural context of the individual. For instance, Nilayamgode's recollections about her father are not a product of her personal,

empirical experiences. Young Devaki was not fortunate enough to see her father, Pakaravoor Krishnan Somayajippad (Nilayamgode 3). Nevertheless, she had heard people describe the famous somayaji's complexion and inner radiance, which were internalised as her individual memories. Hence, personal memories are informed by the memories of the family, community, or society. They are influenced by the social groups to which the individuals belong, the historical period they live in, and the cultural narratives surrounding them. Similarly, Nilayamgode's memories are shaped by the common notions of her period, the customs and traditions of her family, her relationship with each of its members, and even her gender.

Another instance from the memoir narrates the account of the death of Nilayamgode's father-in-law, who passed away two years before Devaki was married to her husband. Even while drawing his last breaths, the dying Somayajippad was cleansed before being laid down on the *vadakkini* floor near the *homam* fires (Nilayamgode 22). The author says that the story was recounted to her multiple times by the Nilayamgode family members. Her individual memory was given to her by the immediate social structures of memory surrounding her, which were the Nilayamgode family.

There exists an interplay between individual memory and collective memory, which is relevant in the context of cultural memory studies. Individual memory is intertwined with collective memory. Devaki Nilayamgode's personal reflection in the work reflects not only her own experiences but also the broader cultural context, family traditions, and societal norms. Her memories intersect with the collective memory of the Namboodiri community, Kerala's history, and the socio-cultural milieu of her time.

Collective memory

Collective memory (*mémoire collective*) is a key concept of Cultural Memory Studies that evolved from the works of Maurice Halbwachs. It is the subsequent and most significant

level of cultural memory. In his 1925 work titled "Social Frameworks of Memory" (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), Maurice Halbwachs emphasised that memory is dependent on social structures. These structures can encompass various contexts, including families, peer groups, residential associations, and even religious communities (Erll 304). The concept of social frameworks of memory (*cadres sociaux*) is the starting point of his theory. Social frameworks of memory refer to social groups, starting with families and extending to nations, with which individuals communicate and interact. These frameworks provide a context for individual memories. Social frameworks do not attempt to erase personal experiences but rather enrich the individual's perception of the events.

Individual memory and collective memory are mutually dependent on each other. Maurice Halbwachs argues that individual memory formation involves taking the perspective of the group, while the group's memory becomes real through individual acts of remembering. Halbwachs also suggests that each individual memory is a "point of view" (*point de vue*) on the collective memory. The cultural background of the individual socially forms this point of view.

Nilayamgode's memoir transcends the realms of individual reminiscence as a Malayali Brahmin woman against the backdrop of a community's entrenched patriarchal strictures known as *anaacharams*. While her memories undoubtedly serve as the narrative's foundation, the text functions as a critical archive of the community's practices and the socio-historical transformations that weakened its self-proclaimed authoritarian position.

Since an individual is not associated with a single group, they are related to multiple collective memories. For instance, Nilayamgode was affiliated with several social frameworks, including the family of her birth house, the *Pakaravoor mana*; her husband's family at Nilayamgode; the Malayali Brahmin community in central Kerala; and the religion she

practised. In Devaki Nilayamgode's memoir, family forms her most immediate *cadres sociaux*. Her socialisation within the family framework inculcated the established traditions and customs, resulting in the integration of collective memories of her family into her personal repertoire. As an *antharjanam*, a woman belonging to a namboodiri *illam*, Devaki and the other *antharjanams* like her were subjected to certain patriarchal notions that were considered socially acceptable. For example, the *antharjanams* were taught to observe *ghosha*, a form of social exclusion. Sanctioned by the community members, these seclusionary practices formed the everyday fabric of these *antharjanams*. Therefore, Nilayamgode's early memories of the women belonging to her community featured *putappu*-clad figures holding cadjan umbrellas, always chaperoned outside and domesticated inside the dull walls of the *illams*. This picture was accepted and glorified by the Namboodiri men. Nilayamgode also recollects the preferential treatment that young Namboodiri boys in her community received because it was approved by the social frameworks of her time. In her memories, namboodiri boys were nurtured in all sorts of comforts, as they were considered family assets. Their education was encouraged, while it was denied to girls.

Her memoir is not limited to Nilayamgode's recollections of her life in the *illam* with her own community. While narrating the story of Namboodiri men and women, she also recounts the community's relationship with other castes. During her upbringing, social groups practised untouchability, fearing contamination from lower castes. For instance, the wet nurses cared for the infants but were prohibited from breastfeeding them to prevent contamination. *Irikkanammas*, who accompanied the *antharjanams* like a shadow, were kept apart due to their Nair community affiliation. In a chapter titled "Visitors," Nilayamgode reminisces about her Nair cousins Subhadra and Bharati, who visited the Pakaravoor *i*llam. As Nair women, they resided in a separate section of the house called *Madhom* (Nilayamgode 35). Nilayamgode

found the contrasting freedom levels between the *antharjanams* and the Nair women intriguing. While *antharjanams* appeared plain, Nair women, like her cousins, adorned themselves with colourful clothing, jewellery, and fragrances. These memories extend beyond Nilayamgode's family and represent the socio-cultural contexts of the era.

Cultural Memory Studies thus highlight the privilege-disadvantage dialectic by focusing on the power dynamics within intercultural relations. Certain socio-cultural groups wield more power to shape memory narratives. In Nilayamgode's memoir, only the Namboodiri men were allowed to read and write, and only the Brahmins received training in Sanskrit. The communities considered lower to Brahmins in the social stratification had no access to education, and hence, their narratives were not fixed in a medium. Therefore, the mainstream history of the age reflected the narrative of the dominant social group.

Nilayamgode's description of the interdependent relationship between the women of Pakaravoor Mana and the Veluthedathu family, who tended to keep the *antharjanams*' clothes cleaned, starched, and vibrant, sheds light on the hierarchical nature of the stranded society of her time. Even the varying designs used in clothes and ornaments were suggestive of the different positions enjoyed by various sects within Kerala society. Religion was an integral part of the Brahmin community's life. Devaki Nilayamgode confirms that the Mookkuthala temple was associated with her childhood, as she was born and brought up in its vicinity (Nilayamgode 39). During her youthful and naïve years, the temple and the surrounding greenery became her joyful playground.

Collective memory does not stand for a literal kind of recollection. Rather, it is about how social groups shape their identity through shared experiences. In other words, collective memory is a metaphorical concept.

Halbwachs examines family memory as a distinct form of collective memory alongside religious communities and social classes. Halbwachs observes that families possess unique memories, particularly those centred around kinship relations. He also recognises the diverse cultural manifestations of the family concept. Family memories are powerful because of the emotional connections that exist within the family members. In *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*, Devaki Nilayamgode's family becomes a microcosm of the Brahmin community in Kerala during her childhood. The family served as their only social framework for the *antharjanams*, who were restricted to the shadowy illams. Their education began and ended inside the illam. They only ventured as far as the water tanks within the compound for bathing and returned. Thus, Nilayamgode's narrative aligns with Halbwachs' assertion regarding the inescapable nature of family memories (Erll 306). Regardless of how we become part of a family, whether through birth, marriage, or other means, we find ourselves positioned within a group, subject to rules and customs that predate our existence.

Family memory represents a form of intergenerational memory (Erll 306). Grandparents, parents, and children engage in constant communication that shapes their collective memory. A dynamic exchange of "living memory" occurs between eyewitnesses and their descendants. The family's history or memories of the elderly members are transmitted to the next generation, primarily through oral narration, to keep these memories alive. Each successive generation inherits a continuum of collective memory from its predecessors and actively contributes to perpetuating this historical chain. Everyday communication serves as the conduit for inter-generational transmission. These practices, such as intentional interactions, emotional connections, and the transmission of shared memories across generations, are called mnemonic practices. They significantly contribute to shaping family identity and ensuring continuity. Thus, the family becomes a mnemonic community, a group

that collectively remembers and preserves its shared history. Family memories fulfil the normative and formative functions of a society.

Sites of Memory

'*Lieux de mémoire'* or 'sites of memory' is a concept introduced by Pierre Nora. Sites of memory are created by an interplay of memory and history (Nora 19). In layperson's terms, sites of memory are things that help us remember the past. However, Pierre Nora attests to a more complex meaning for the concept. Sites of memory arise from historical ruptures; that is, they emerge from significant moments of change where there is a clear break from the past. A sense of losing important memories surfaces when this break from the past occurs. These sites of memory embody recollections of the past. These sites were created to actively maintain a connection with the past.

Nora classifies sites of memory based on their actual or virtual location. The material manifestations of sites of memory are physical places, topographical memory sites, and monumental memory sites, like museums, battlefields, or monuments. Sites of memory can be commemorative practices like holidays and songs or stories to keep the history of a family or community alive.

Collective memory and the creation of traditions

Halbwachs' later work, *La topographie légendaire,* delves into the realm of collective memories spanning vast stretches of time. These memories necessitate external structures for persistence. Here, the concept of 'mnemonic space and objects' becomes crucial. Physical elements like architecture, pilgrimage routes, and even graves hold symbolic significance. Traditions, in turn, are formed through the creation and ongoing interaction with these mnemonic elements.

Traditions are created within a collective. Individual memories fade with time. By being tied to shared cultural spaces and objects, traditions offer a mechanism for transmitting knowledge and stories across generations. Pilgrimage routes, for instance, not only commemorate past events but also serve as a way to pass them down through participation in the tradition. Collective memories and traditions foster a sense of belonging and shared identity within a group. These traditions become markers of a group's history and values and create a sense of connection between past, present, and future members. They act as a unifying force, reminding individuals of their place within a larger social fabric.

Walter Benjamin's address book, published in 2006, marked the beginning of the theories of Cultural Memory Studies (Pethes 2). While initially appearing as a personal tool for remembering individual contacts, its publication shed light on a broader societal memory. The address book functioned as a tool developed to compensate for the limitations of human memory. What was once a memory aid for a single person becomes a historical artefact, a reminder of Benjamin himself and the tumultuous period during which he was forced into exile. This shift in perspective is central to cultural memory studies, that is, the transition from individual recollection to a collective memory shared across generations. Benjamin's address book became a record of his social network. The names and addresses within offer a glimpse into the broader cultural and political landscape he inhabited. This information, once used for personal connection, now contributes to a more extensive understanding of a specific historical moment. Furthermore, the address book serves as a testament to the disruptive nature of Benjamin's exile. His personal record became a poignant reminder of the fractured social fabric caused by persecution.

The role of media in Cultural Memory Studies

Cultural Memory Studies are deeply dependent on the media in several ways. To understand the interdependency of cultural memory and media, it is imperative to comprehend the term 'working memory'. The theorist Aleida Assmann distinguished between 'archival memory' and 'working memory'. Libraries, museums, and historical records constitute the archival memory, a latent storehouse of information from the past. On the other hand, working memory is the product of what is actively remembered and shared within a society. Similar to archival memory, working memory too relies on chosen aspects of the past. However, working memory is a society's active and collective recollection (Rigney 7).

Cultural memory functions as a constantly active 'working memory'. The media we consume and the memorial practices we engage in shape our collective memories. Media acts as a bridge between archival memory and working memory. With the help of media forms like oral traditions, newspapers, historical documents, memoirs, photographs, sculptures, and audio recordings, working memories are circulated in society so that succeeding generations can recall the memories of their preceding generations. Commemorative forms like memorials and monuments, museums and exhibitions, and anniversaries transmit cultural memories through these public communication channels.

In Nilayamgode's memoir, the presence and influence of "cultural texts" or scriptures like the Mahabharata, *Bhagavatam*, *Ramayanam*, and *Shivapuranam* played a significant role in shaping Devaki's family memories and the overall cultural background of the time. When studying cultural memory studies, an intriguing question is how stories and images from the broader culture influence what families remember and vice versa, that is, how family stories become part of the more significant cultural memory. For the same reason, rituals and texts were prescribed for both Namboodiri men and women to shape their morality and intellect. The *antharjanams* and young girls were encouraged to read the story of the forgiving Sheelavati

instead of the bravery of Unniarcha, fearing the influential effect of these cultural texts. Similarly, the songs of *Kaikottikkali* involving the *antharjanams* deliberately avoided narratives of female empowerment and autonomy.

Conclusion

Nilayamgode's memoir, while recounting her personal experiences of growing up in a Namboodiri *illam,* delineates the distinctive social structures and traditions of this Kerala community. However, Nilayamgode's recollections are not limited to the domestic space and her personal experiences. Her individual memories are interwoven with memories of annual festivals like Onam, a harrowing childhood flood, and historical events such as the pre-birth 1924 floods. She additionally incorporates references to prevalent medical practices, such as poison-cure treatment, the socio-legal concept of *Smartavicharam,* and the institution of *Sambandham.* Through her memoir, Nilayamgode constructs a holistic portrayal of Kerala's socio-cultural landscape in the early 20th century, effectively embodying the tenets of cultural memory studies.

The field of Cultural Memory Studies is broad and continues to expand with contributions from various disciplines. Cultural Memory Studies illuminate the intricate relationship shared by culture and memory. This metatheoretical study analysed the field of study and its key concepts, utilising Devaki Nilayamgode's evocative memoir, *Antharjanam: Memories of a Namboodiri Woman,* as a potent lens.

This paper also established Cultural Memory Studies as a multifaceted field, drawing from various disciplines like sociology, anthropology, history, and literature. It ventures beyond the limits of individual memory, emphasising the social dimension of memory. The study traced the emergence of the field in Germany, grappling with the legacy of the Nazi regime, and highlighted its global applicability as societies grapple with their pasts. It also

delved into the fundamental notions in cultural memory studies, such as individual memory, collective memory, and the role of media in cultural memory studies. The dialectical relationship between culture and memory was explored, emphasising how memory is not static but evolves over time. Individual memory, formed by cultural context, serves as the foundation of collective memory. The study utilised Nilayamgode's memoir to illustrate how individual memories are intertwined with the collective memory of the Namboodiri community.

The concept of collective memory, a cornerstone of Cultural Memory Studies, was examined. This paper analyses how social frameworks, as emphasised by Maurice Halbwachs, shape collective memory. Nilayamgode's experiences within her family, the Namboodiri community, and the broader caste system exemplify the interplay of social structures and collective memory. The paper highlighted the power dynamics within intercultural relations, where the narratives of the dominant groups hold more significant sway in shaping memory narratives.

Finally, the concept of sites of memory, introduced by Pierre Nora, was explored. These tangible or intangible elements evoke memories of the past, often arising from periods of historical rupture. Nilayamgode's memoir itself serves as a site of memory, preserving the experiences and traditions of the Namboodiri community that are transforming.

In conclusion, by examining the interplay between individual and collective memory, the social construction of memory, and the role of the sites of memory, this field sheds light on the ongoing process of shaping cultural identities. Nilayamgode's memoir serves as a powerful testament to this dynamic process, offering invaluable insights into a bygone era and the enduring power of memory.

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Embodied Politics in Chandralekha's Dance: Exploring the Intersections of Body, Energy, and Resistance

Alina Joseph

Abstract: Chandralekha, a pioneering figure in contemporary Indian dance, revolutionised the art form through her radical departure from traditional conventions. Her work challenged societal norms, empowered women, and explored the human body's complexities. This paper examines Chandralekha's artistic journey, focusing on exploring the body as a medium of energy and resistance. Drawing on feminist performativity theory, the paper analyses how Chandralekha's choreography subverted traditional gender performances and empowered women to reclaim their agency. By rejecting conventional elements and embracing a more body-centric approach, Chandralekha challenged patriarchal structures and created a space for women to express themselves authentically. Furthermore, the paper explores Chandralekha's use of dance as a tool for social critique. Her work addressed issues such as colonialism, gender inequality, and social injustice, challenging audiences to reflect on their beliefs and values. Through her choreography, Chandralekha offered a powerful vision of resistance and empowerment, inspiring dancers and scholars worldwide. By examining Chandralekha's work through a feminist performative lens, this paper highlights her significant contributions to contemporary Indian dance and her enduring impact on the field.

Keywords: *Chandralekha, Indian dance, feminist performativity, body politics, social critique*

Chandralekha was an iconic dancer, writer, and choreographer who discarded all conventional and stereotypical elements of dance for more passionate body-oriented movements. Her fierce individualism left an indelible mark in the cosmos of dance. By utilising all the traditional tales of dance, she transcended rebellion and innovation, which profoundly impacted the culture. Chandralekha, often known as a dancer, was associated with more creative disciplines and activities than almost any other artist living in India in the past two centuries. She committed herself to the "art of living" in a highly creative way. For Chandralekha, holding one's spine straight without bowing to any patriarchy was freedom. She has not only revolutionised the language of dance but also defied traditional notions of Indian womanhood by rejecting the conventions of family, marriage, and motherhood.

The exceptionality lies in Chandralekha's life, making categorising her under a single word difficult. While her subjectivity is deeply intense and occasionally egotistic, it never veers into isolationism. On the contrary, she has always attempted to connect her work to all movements committed to realising a more humane and ecologically balanced world.

Chandralekha's theory, deeply rooted in feminist ideology and anti-colonial sentiment, has been rigorously tested through her ground-breaking work. Her bold integration of *Bharatanatyam* with elements from martial arts, yoga, and modern dance was not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate statement against the rigid structures and patriarchal underpinnings of traditional dance forms. Chandralekha's performances were a testament to her beliefs. She stripped away the ornate costumes and heavy makeup to reveal a raw, authentic connection between the dancer and the dance. This minimalist aesthetic emphasised the

dancer's body as a powerful instrument of expression, challenging societal norms that objectified and marginalised women.

Chandralekha's approach to dance was not just an artistic choice but a political one as well. She saw her art as a means to challenge and change the *status quo*. Her performances were imbued with a sense of urgency and purpose, seeking to awaken and inspire audiences to think critically about the world around them. Her choreography was a dialogue with the audience, a call to action that went beyond the aesthetic to touch the social and political. This aspect of her work made her not just a dancer but a visionary who used the language of movement to communicate profound truths about life and society.

The article "Erotica in Motion" by Anupama Bhattacharya delves into Chandralekha's daring departure from conventional dance, replacing devotional elements with raw, body-centric movements. Chandralekha's choreography challenges societal norms, reclaiming the female body as a potent agency symbol. Bhattacharya navigates the complexities of spectatorship, suggesting that Chandralekha's performances prompt audiences to confront their desires and biases. While lauded for its boldness, critiques arise regarding the potential reinforcement of objectification and exclusionary narratives. Bhattacharya's work sparks crucial discourse on the transformative power and ethical implications of eroticism in dance, urging scholars to engage critically with its societal ramifications.

Mitra's "Living a Body Myth, performing a Body Reality: Reclaiming the Corporeality and Sexuality of the Indian Female Dancer" delves into the societal conflict imposed on Indian female dancer's bodies, confronting contemporary expectations against expressions of desire and sexuality within the performance. Drawing from Turner's concepts of liminality and

Brechtian defamiliarisation, she offers a feminist lens to reclaim corporeal autonomy amidst the nationalist narrative of "chaste" womanhood. Mitra illuminates the intricate negotiation of tradition and liberation within Indian dance. The paper argues the significance of Mitra's scholarly intervention in challenging entrenched gender norms and reclaiming agency for female performers in Indian cultural discourse.

“Chandralekha: Negotiating the Female Body and Movement in Cultural/Political Signification” by Ananya Chatterjea explores the intersection of gender, body, and cultural politics in Indian dance. Through Chandralekha's pioneering work, Ananya examines how the female body becomes a site for resistance and negotiation within traditional dance forms. Chandralekha's choreography challenges societal norms, empowering women to reclaim agency through movement. Chatterjea illuminates the significance of Chandralekha's contributions, highlighting the transformative potential of dance as a medium for cultural and political expression, particularly for marginalised voices.

Ananya Chatterjee's article “Dance Research in India: A Brief Report” provides a concise overview of dance research in India, offering insights into its historical context, current trends, and future directions. By synthesising existing scholarship, Chatterjee identifies key themes such as tradition versus innovation, globalization's impact on Indigenous forms, and the role of gender and identity in dance practice. Through this analysis, Chatterjea underscores the dynamic nature of Indian dance research, highlighting its significance in shaping cultural discourse and fostering artistic exchange. Her report serves as a valuable resource for scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts interested in understanding the multifaceted landscape of Indian dance scholarship.

Leela Samson's paper “Classical Dance in Contemporary India” delves into the evolving landscape of classical dance in contemporary India. Drawing on her expertise as a dancer and scholar, Samson examines the intersection of tradition and modernity in classical dance forms such as *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*. She explores how dancers navigate cultural authenticity through insightful analysis while embracing innovation and experimentation. Samson highlights the role of institutions, practitioners, and cultural policies in shaping the trajectory of classical dance in India. This paper offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing classical dancers in contemporary India's rapidly changing socio-cultural context.

Despite the insightful examinations of Chandralekha's ground-breaking choreography and its societal implications, a notable research gap exists regarding the nuanced impact of Chandralekha's work on diverse audiences. While these studies touch upon the confrontation of societal norms and the reclamation of agency through dance, further investigation is warranted into the reception and interpretation of Chandralekha's performances across different cultural, generational, and socio-economic contexts. Understanding how various audience demographics engage with and interpret Chandralekha's choreography can provide valuable insights into the broader societal attitudes towards female embodiment, agency, and the role of art in challenging hegemonic narratives.

This paper argues that Chandralekha's revolutionary approach to dance, characterised by her exploration of the body as a medium of energy and resistance, was a profound act of cultural critique and social activism. By emphasising the intrinsic power and potential of the human body, Chandralekha rejected conventional and stereotypical elements in dance, highlighting its

capacity to challenge patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, and social injustices. Her choreography, deeply infused with her philosophical, political, and feminist beliefs, transformed the art of Indian dance. Chandralekha's work exemplifies how the body can transcend physicality to become a dynamic site for resistance, self-assertion, and profound human expression, redefining the relationship between the dancer, the dance, and society.

Analysis

Chandralekha, throughout her life, yearned to strip away the embellishments, the stereotypical ornaments, and the male gaze that prevailed in traditional Indian art. Her protest against the conventional dolling up of female dancers was a powerful statement. She felt that the makeup and costumes were a mask, concealing the true essence of the dancer. Reflecting on the *Devadasi* tradition, she realised that while wearing these traditional costumes, she desired to discard them and be her authentic self. When she began her choreography, she aimed for her costumes to reflect the harmony of her everyday life, seeking freedom in her dance that was unshackled from excessive ornamentation.

As a pioneer of contemporary Indian dance, she holds a rich tapestry of philosophical, political, and personal beliefs in arts. Movements like feminism, anti-colonialism, and human rights shaped her unique approach to dance. By questioning the conventional elements of dance as a person, she always criticises the roles of women and their status in society, which men dominate. According to her way of looking at dance, it should evolve into a potent means of resistance and self-assertion.

Feminist theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding Chandralekha's critique of patriarchal structures within traditional Indian dance. By rejecting conventional

embellishments and stereotypical representations, Chandralekha disrupts the male gaze and asserts the autonomy and agency of female dancers. Key feminist theorist Judith Butler offers insights into the performative nature of gender and how Chandralekha's choreography subverts patriarchal narratives (cite). Butler's concept of gender performativity elucidates how Chandralekha's dances deconstruct fixed notions of femininity and empower women to reclaim their bodies and narratives.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Judith Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological category but rather a social construct that is constantly performed through various acts and behaviors. This performativity challenges the notion of gender as a stable, essential characteristic. Chandralekha's choreography can be seen as a deliberate subversion of these gender performances. Analysing through the lens of Butler's Performative theory, Chandralekha's work challenges the essentialist notion of gender, which posits that gender is a fixed biological category determined by one's sex at birth. Instead, she demonstrates that gender is a social construct shaped and performed through various cultural and social practices. By rejecting traditional feminine stereotypes in her dance, Chandralekha subverts the performative aspects of gender that reinforce patriarchal norms. According to Chandralekha, dance is a form of performance that embodies and expresses social and cultural meanings. Her choreography is a deliberate subversion of traditional gender performances in Indian dance. She rejects conventional elements such as elaborate costumes, makeup, and delicate movements, instead opting for raw, expressive movements that challenge the expectations associated with femininity. By disrupting these performances, Chandralekha questions the very foundations of gender itself. Butler's theory gives an understanding that

Chandralekha's subversion of traditional gender performances is not merely a rejection of existing norms but a reclaiming of the agency of women. By defying the limitations placed on female dancers, she creates a space for women to explore movement and express themselves authentically, free from the constraints of societal expectations. The central establishment of Chandralekha's dance is that it offers a new vision of femininity that is not constrained by traditional stereotypes and expectations. Her performances challenge the notion that women must be passive, submissive, and delicate. Instead, she presents a powerful, assertive, and expressive vision of femininity. By redefining femininity, Chandralekha contributes to a broader movement to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures.

Chandralekha presumed that our body is an eloquent site from which we express our personal and political expressions. This conviction was entrenched in her feminist ideology. In a male-dominated society like India, Chandralekha fought through her dance for the liberation of women, and the injustices prevailed in India. As an artist, she raised her artistic freedom to prove how women are subjected to patriarchal dominations and objectification and made the solution for all through her own life. She sought to reclaim the empowerment of women through her dance. While men portray females as passive characters or subservient ones, Chandralekha, like her own reflection, presents them as dynamic, strong, and autonomous beings to the audience. As her life responsibility towards society as an artist, she emphasized the strength and fluidity of the female body by celebrating its grace and power.

According to Chandralekha, a continuous quest for self-discovery is the fundamental relationship between dancer and dance. She believed that dance was an extension of the dancer's inner world, a medium through which personal experiences, emotions, and

philosophies could be expressed. Her choreographic works often defied traditional norms, incorporating elements of yoga, martial arts, and *Kalaripayattu* (an ancient Indian martial art form) to create a language that was uniquely her own. This synthesis of different forms was not merely an aesthetic choice but a reflection of her internal journey toward understanding the body, movement, and consciousness. Her choreographies expressed herself by connecting dance to a breath and motion echoing her belief that dance was a channel for deeper spiritual and personal exploration.

Even though she concentrated more on her spiritual growth, she equally committed to engaging her life and dance with the external societal context in which her art existed. She used dance as a platform to deliver her personal debates against society by stating issues of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity. Chandralekha's unapologetic exploration of these themes resonated with contemporary feminist discourse and positioned her as a radical voice in Indian dance. Chandralekha's legacy extends beyond her innovative choreographic works.

Chandralekha always holds her feminist perspectives not just to her dance but also to all borders of life that she stepping into. She fostered a supportive environment for her fellow dancers by encouraging them to explore their individuality and assert their societal agency. These new approaches to traditional dance became more challenging than expected because of the imposition imposed on the practitioners by the hierarchies. By contributing such an effect on society, Chandralekha won the place not just as an artist but as a revolutionary who empowered the artists, especially women, to control their bodies and narratives.

Chandralekha’s commitment to anti-colonialism later enriched her artistic vision. She was deeply aware of the lingering effects of colonialism on the identity and culture of Indian

society. She sought to decolonise dance by discarding colonial paradigms and adapting more inclusive Indigenous traditions into the spectrum of dance. Rather than sticking to conventional structures, she infused contemporary styles to make dance more connected to the audience.

As an activist for human rights, she addressed the broader political and social issues through her works. She was deeply concerned about the lives of marginalised communities in society, so for that she became their voice for advocating change. Through powerful imagery and evocative movements, she highlighted the themes of freedom, struggle against oppression, and justice. Her performance was not merely an artistic expression but an act of resistance, challenging the audience to reflect on their actions and beliefs.

Chandralekha was one of the early pioneers who chose to explore the scope of artistic expression through *Bharatanatyam* and yet took liberties to explore the limits of its existent grammar and tradition. Chandralekha's choreographies have been known to be bold, minimalistic, non-narrative, non-linear, abstract, deconstructed, and contemporary. Her dance productions were worked out in the pure dance or *nritta* sans the expressional aspect of dance that presented abstract themes and sometimes questioned or subverted the status quo of the themes of traditional *Bharatnatyam* through modern choreographic techniques.

Although based on *Bharatanatyam*, its modernity lay in the fact that it explored the form's close interactions with the martial form of *Kalarippayattu* and the physical discipline of Yoga in a way that helped her enlarge the scope of the body language of dancers and bring to fore her ideas and questions on the body and its interactions in the contemporary society.

Chandralekha was and will remain the first one to break the body of *Bharatanatyam* from being the art of the soloist to becoming a group or ensemble work. Before this, while many

group productions abound, chiefly the *Kalakshetra* variety of mythological dance dramas and Nataraj-Shakuntala ones, *Bharatanatyam* had not been so used to quantify a movement.

As Richard Schechner articulated in *Restoration of Behavior*, “Between Theatre and Anthropology, performance theory is essential for analyzing Chandralekha's innovative choreographic methods. This theoretical perspective explores how her integration of yoga, martial arts, and traditional Indian dance forms creates a unique performance language that transcends aesthetic boundaries.” Schechner’s notion of performance as a transformative process highlights how Chandralekha's dances entertain and provoke critical reflection and social change.

Through the lens of Performance Theory, Chandralekha's fusion of yoga, martial arts, and classical Indian dance transcends mere aesthetics, creating a transformative experience for both the dancer and the audience. Schechner's concept of performance as a transformative process aligns with Chandralekha's use of movement as a tool for self-discovery. By incorporating elements from disciplines focused on breath, strength, and internal energy, Chandralekha pushes the boundaries of the body's potential and expression. This exploration becomes a journey for the dancer, fostering self-awareness and empowerment.

In terms of technical style, she was a modernist who broke away from the classical format of presentation with its traditional repertoire, brocaded costumery, mythological narratives, *nayaka-nayika* themes, mimetic facial expressions, and the principles of classical dance composition. Her artistic creativity was postmodern as she self-consciously made use of earlier conventions and styles, though to be presented in unconventional ways. These included addressing selective traditional Indian concepts through alternate means of portrayal,

independent and innovative ideas of choreography, the usage of other traditional physical disciplines and styles, familiar but unconventional and simple costuming and added importance to bodily expression. The technique that resulted could not be called a fusion of forms nor was it representative of a hybrid nature. It was sometimes both but also much more as the body language of each successive dance work that Chandralekha created gained from the lessons that the body had learned and embodied from the previous ones.

Chandralekha's career can be divided into three phases, each characterised by unique themes, dance vocabulary, and physical disciplines. Her early works, such as *Devadasi* (1959) and *Navagraha* (early 1970s), laid the groundwork for her later explorations of the body. These initial pieces showcased her ability to combine traditional *Bharatanatyam* elements with innovative approaches, setting the stage for her groundbreaking future works. *Devadasi* delved into the history of *Bharatanatyam*, exploring the role of *devadasis* (temple dancers) in Indian culture. Chandralekha used dance to convey these women's historical and cultural significance, challenging traditional stereotypes and highlighting their contributions to Indian art. Similarly, *Navagraha*, inspired by the nine planets of Indian astrology, introduced elements of yoga and meditation into Chandralekha's choreography. This marked the beginning of her exploration of the body's potential beyond its aesthetic function, suggesting a deeper connection between dance and spiritual practices.

These early works paved the way for Chandralekha's subsequent explorations of the body in various facets. Her later choreographies emphasised the body's potency, challenging its traditional status quo in Indian society. By focusing on the body's physical capabilities, its expressive power, and its potential for social and political commentary, Chandralekha

redefined the possibilities of *Bharatanatyam*. She empowered women to reclaim their agency through movement. Stepping next to Chandralekha's choreographies, *Angika* (1985) and *Prana* (1990) represent significant milestones in her exploration of the body's potential. In *Angika*, Chandralekha focused on the foundational principles of dance: spine, control, balance, and flow. She combined these principles with elements of *Kalaripayattu*, a martial art from Kerala, to strengthen and empower the dancer's body. Chandralekha aimed to create a more grounded and dynamic approach to the art form by emphasising the physical aspects of dance. At the same time, *Prana* delved deeper into the body's connection to the mind and spirit. Incorporating yogic *asanas* and breathing techniques, Chandralekha explored the power of breath and its influence on the body's energy levels and overall well-being. This work highlighted the importance of cultivating a harmonious relationship between dance's physical, mental, and spiritual aspects.

Through these two choreographies, Chandralekha demonstrated her commitment to exploring the full potential of the body in dance. She sought to create a holistic approach to the art form, recognizing the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and spiritual elements. This exploration laid the groundwork for her future work, which continued to delve into the complexities of the body and its relationship to dance and society.

In phase two, women were celebrated as the central theme. Her work *Sri* (1991) explored the complexities of womanhood and the societal challenges women face. Chandralekha used dance to convey women's experiences, highlighting their strength, resilience, and overcoming obstacles. She used women as a language to communicate with her subjects towards the society. The choreography explored motherhood, love, loss, and the struggle for equality.

Chandralekha's goal was to create a space for women to see themselves reflected on stage, empowering them and challenging traditional stereotypes.

Chandralekha's *Yantra* (1994) continued her exploration of women and their experiences, using dance as a powerful language to convey their stories. "Yantra" refers to a sacred geometric diagram in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, often used for meditation and spiritual practices. Chandralekha adapted this concept to create a dance that served as a symbolic representation of the complex and multifaceted nature of womanhood. *Yantra* delved into the intricacies of female identity, exploring themes such as power, vulnerability, and resilience. Through her choreography, Chandralekha challenged traditional gender roles and expectations, highlighting the strength and agency of women. The dance also explored women's interconnectedness and experiences, emphasizing the importance of solidarity and collective action.

In phase three, Chandralekha's *Raga* (1998) is seen as a powerful exploration of femininity through the medium of dance. "Raga" refers to a melodic mode or scale in Indian classical music, often associated with emotions and moods. In *Raga*, Chandralekha used dance to visually represent these emotions, exploring how the body can convey feelings and ideas. The choreography focused on the physical aspects of femininity, showcasing the female body's beauty, strength, and vulnerability. Chandralekha used movement to explore the nuances of feminine expression, from the delicate grace of a flower to the powerful strength of a warrior. By focusing on the body's ability to communicate emotions and ideas, Chandralekha challenged traditional stereotypes and expanded the possibilities of dance as a form of expression.

Chandralekha's *Sloka* (1999) and *Sharira* (2001) continued her exploration of femininity through the physical body, delving deeper into its complexities and potential. *Sloka* is a Sanskrit term that refers to a verse or stanza. In Chandralekha's choreography, the term suggests a structured and rhythmic body exploration. The work focused on the body's ability to express complex emotions and ideas through movement. Chandralekha used dance to convey the nuances of feminine experience, from a flower's delicate grace to a warrior's powerful strength. *Sloka* challenged traditional stereotypes of femininity, presenting the female body as a source of strength, agency, and resistance. Chandralekha explored how the body can be a site of empowerment and self-expression through her choreography.

In *Sharira*, Chandralekha delved deeply into the body's physicality, examining its relationship to identity, sexuality, and power. She used dance to challenge traditional notions of femininity, exploring the body's potential for resistance and self-expression. *Sharira* is a provocative and thought-provoking work that explores the complexities of the female body. Chandralekha used dance to challenge societal expectations and stereotypes, empowering women to reclaim their bodies and narratives. The work is a powerful statement about the body's ability to resist oppression and create new meanings.

By incorporating elements from *Kalaripayattu* and Yoga, Chandralekha strengthened the structure and form of *Bharatanatyam*, creating a more dynamic and grounded approach to the art form. By focusing on the body's physical capabilities, expressive power, and potential for resistance. Through her ground-breaking works, her legacy will continue to inspire dancers and scholars worldwide, serving as a testament to the transformative power of art.

Chandralekha's legacy lies in her unwavering dedication to pushing the boundaries of *Bharatanatyam*. She transformed it from a soloist art form steeped in tradition to a platform for bold experimentation.

Chandralekha's revolutionary approach to dance, characterised by her exploration of the body as a medium of energy and resistance, was a profound act of cultural critique and social activism. By emphasising the intrinsic power and potential of the human body, Chandralekha rejected conventional and stereotypical elements in dance, highlighting its capacity to challenge patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, and social injustices. Her choreography, deeply infused with her philosophical, political, and feminist beliefs, transformed the art of Indian dance. Chandralekha's work exemplifies how the body can transcend mere physicality to become a dynamic site for resistance, self-assertion, and profound human expression, thereby redefining the relationship between the dancer, the dance, and society.

Chandralekha's legacy extends beyond the Indian dance scene, influencing contemporary dance practices worldwide. Her unwavering commitment to pushing boundaries and questioning tradition continues to inspire artists to redefine the role of dance in society. Today, we see echoes of her innovative spirit in works that explore social and political issues, challenge gender norms, and embrace diverse forms of movement.

Perhaps the most enduring element of Chandralekha's contribution lies in her unwavering belief in the transformative power of dance. She saw dance not just as entertainment but as a means for self-discovery, social critique, and cultural transformation. She redefined the relationship between the dancer, the dance, and society, highlighting the power of movement

to spark dialogue, challenge assumptions, and inspire change. Her life and work serve as a powerful reminder that when infused with courage and conviction, artistic expression can become a potent force for social transformation and personal liberation.

In the expansive canvas of Chandralekha's legacy, her impact is akin to a seismic shift in the very bedrock of artistic expression. Beyond the confines of traditional dance, she emerges as a beacon of defiance, challenging the ossified structures of convention and heralding a new era of boundless creativity and social engagement. Her unwavering commitment to artistic freedom serves as both a battle cry and a guiding light for generations of dancers, artists, and activists who dare to tread the path less travelled.

Conclusion

Chandralekha's revolutionary approach to dance was not merely a divergence from established norms; it was a bold assertion of individuality and agency in a world dictated by tradition and patriarchy. Through her minimalist, abstract choreography, she stripped away the veneer of embellishments and ornamentation, revealing the raw, unadulterated essence of movement. In doing so, she transcended the confines of classical *Bharatanatyam*, forging a new language of expression that resonated with audiences far beyond the borders of India.

As we embark on a deeper exploration of Chandralekha's vast repertoire, we must not only scrutinise the intricate reception of her choreography across diverse audiences but also delve into the global impact of her visionary artistry. Her work transcends geographical borders, weaving a tapestry of inspiration that spans cultures and continents, challenging preconceived notions and igniting a revolution in the way we perceive dance and its transformative potential.

In dissecting Chandralekha's contributions with a critical lens, we unearth the seismic shifts she initiated in the landscape of contemporary dance. Her legacy serves as a rallying cry for those who dare to defy the constraints of tradition and embrace the boundless expanse of human expression. Through her artistry, she reminds us of the profound power of dance to transcend barriers, provoke thought, and incite change.

As a mentor and inspiration to countless artists, she fostered a spirit of experimentation and critical engagement, urging her disciples to question, challenge, and reimagine the boundaries of artistic expression. Through her pioneering efforts, she shattered the myth of dance as mere entertainment, elevating it to the realm of high art and social commentary.

Moreover, Chandralekha's legacy resonates with a sense of urgency and relevance in today's tumultuous world. In an age marked by political upheaval, social injustice, and environmental degradation, her message of empowerment, empathy, and resilience serves as a beacon of hope for a better tomorrow. Chandralekha's legacy extends far beyond the stage. Her unwavering commitment to artistic freedom continues to inspire artists to push boundaries and challenge the *status quo*. Further research on Chandralekha's work could explore the reception of her choreography by diverse audiences, the global impact of her artistic vision, and the ongoing influence of her legacy on contemporary dance practices. By critically examining Chandralekha's contributions, we gain a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of dance as a powerful tool for self-discovery, social critique, and artistic innovation.

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Hegemonic Masculinity in *Bramayugam*: A Critical Study of Caste, Class, and Masculine Power Dynamics

A Sreelekshmi

Abstract: Raewyn Connell proposes the existence of multiple masculinities, with hegemonic masculinity being one of them. It underscores the fact that privileges and power are not uniformly distributed among men and are often influenced by factors such as colour, caste, class, disability, and sexual orientation. The collective discourse on masculinity has debunked the prevalent myth of a singular, homogenised masculinity that is perceived solely as an oppositional category to femininity or through the prism of violence. This paper intends to explore the representation of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity in the movie *Bramayugam* (2024) by analysing two characters- the Cook and the *Chathan.* By identifying the ambiguity in the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed in the film, the paper proposes to redefine hegemonic masculinity and intends to contribute to the field of masculinity studies, which is a crucial development in building an egalitarian society.

Keywords: *Raewyn Connell, hegemonic masculinity. Bramayugam, caste, class*

The understanding and mapping of masculinity have become increasingly significant in gender studies, reflecting the relatively recent recognition that men also possess gender identity. Analysing 'manful assertions', whether they be of verbal command, political power,

or physical violence, was a founding objective of masculinity studies. The concept of masculinity, first recorded in 1748, is broadly defined as a social construct that encompasses behaviours, languages, and practices associated with men and is thus culturally defined as not feminine (Whitehead & Barrett). Traditional masculinity norms socialise men to project strength and dominance, particularly over others, and the inherent restrictive stereotypes require men to be stoic, independent, rugged, and powerful. However, it must be noted that masculinity is understood not only in oppositional relations of men *vis-a-vis* women but also in relations of men *vis-a-vis* other men.

Rather than being static and eternal, masculinity is understood as a historical construct that emerges through social participation. Its meaning can vary over time and among people (Kimmel). Before 1600, the male protagonist in the study of manhood was the patriarch in the household, with honour being the watchword. Men's honour was accrued from their behaviour and their women's. By the later 1600s, a very different manly character emerged. The dominant, hegemonic man was no longer defined by his household status and his adherence to good domestic and Christian order but by the fact that he desires and has sex only with women. The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw a distinctive manly type emerge as the polite gentleman moved centre stage. In contrast, perhaps in reaction to the libertine of the Restoration Age, the polite gentleman strove for restraint. Around the time of the Glorious Revolution, historians shifted their focus from the study of manhood to the study of masculinity. Manhood was based upon honour, an externally constituted quality defined by one's reputation in the eyes of others. Masculinity, by contrast, was an internalised identity- an interiority of the mind and emotions- as opposed to a sense of role-playing (Harvey). The twentieth century witnessed a gradual but continuous shift in masculinities,

moving away from the rigid athleticism and conformity imposed on and enacted by middle-class boys and men at the turn of the century.

The interplay of gender with other structures, such as class and race, creates further relationships between masculinities (Connell). One of the key contributions of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell's work is the rejection of masculinity as a monolithic concept. Instead, she recognises multiple masculinities which are not fixed or static but are fluid, dynamic, and subject to change over time. In the early 20th Century, Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony, derived from his analysis of class relations. Hegemony refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity is culturally exalted. Connell subsequently applied this concept of cultural hegemony to the realm of gender, suggesting that the type of masculinity that prevailed as the most honoured way of being a man in any particular locale was 'hegemonic' (Connell and Messerschmidt). Certain men thus had the power to define masculinity, leading to the marginalisation of other forms of masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity focuses on how the dominant group, namely men, establishes and safeguards its dominance over women and other gender identities within the social hierarchy. As an ideology, it serves as a defence mechanism that legitimises and maintains patriarchy, defining the ways people experience and learn about their world. Connell's approach encourages us to consider masculinity in isolation, even from femininity, directing attention towards gendered power as masculine and unidirectional. In each cultural context, the association of masculinity with power varies. Accordingly, hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a form of cultural structuring that can change according to time and place, depending on the struggles within a particular culture (Cornwall and Lindisfarne).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is most valuable in demonstrating that it is not men *per se* but specific ways of being and behaving that are associated with dominance and power. While the physical body serves as a potent indicator of masculinity to many, masculinity still necessitates performance, and others must observe the virtual masculine self. Being a *mard* necessitates conscious demonstrations of *machismo* or hegemonic masculinity in ways that affirm men's power and control: dominant caste men over oppressed caste men, older men over younger men, and all men over all women and minority genders (Gill). This socialisation, initiated within the family, continues with other state ideological apparatuses. At this point, the significant influence of mass media, such as films and television, comes into play. These mediums act as mirrors, reflecting social norms and expectations, including those related to masculinity.

Masculinity, akin to money, is a fundamental component of the film industry. Movies portray masculinity in a myriad of forms, encompassing both healthy and productive behaviours and destructive and harmful traits. Malayalam films, known for their portrayal of social reality, often portray men assuming the role of protector or leader. Throughout the history of Malayalam cinema, directors have depicted manliness and masculinity from various perspectives, such as men having the power to decide how a family should function, treating women as they wish, manhandling women, and subjecting women to serve men in all potential ways. This points to a consistent lack of subaltern perspectives, particularly from lower-caste men and trans-men. This trend sees a shift in Rahul Sadasivan's movie *Bramayugam* (2024), which considers subaltern masculinities.

Bramayugam extends beyond the purpose of frivolous entertainment and comments on the social hierarchy by integrating folktales and myths into the narrative. Set in 17th-

century South Malabar, the film depicts a time when Brahmanical families were at the centre of power, often resorting to violence and cruelty to maintain their dominance. Though the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity in the movie is not discussed, most of the reviews of the movie explore the creation of the subaltern in the movie by focusing on the Brahminical hegemony depicted in the movie, which forms the basis for the hierarchy of masculinity represented in the movie. Afees Ahmed, in his review of the movie, notes the power and the inherent corruption of it depicted through the dynamics of the characters in the movie who are from different social rankings. Justifying the paper's focus on the depiction of hegemonic masculinity in the movie, Ahmed's review categorises the Brahmin antagonist Kodumon Potti (played by Mammootty) as the visible representative of power who utilises and exploits it in order to restrict the subaltern bodies within his sphere of influence by using immoral means (*Maktoob Media*). The review also identifies the uprising against power depicted in the narrative.

Similar to this observation, Soumyabrata Gupta, in his review for *Times Now News*, discusses the employment of the supernatural entity, *Chathan*, in the movie to seek retribution against caste-based oppression. Gupta rightly notes, "Contrary to conventional perceptions, it becomes evident that the true villain of the story is not the *chaathan* but the entrenched caste pride of the Potti family". He brings in instances from the movie, such as *Chathan* treating Thevan as an equal, to suggest its aversion to casteism and the motive to dismantle the hegemony of Brahmins. However, contrary to this, Dr Rajesh Komath, in his review, opines that in the movie*, Chathan* is depicted as more problematic than Brahmins. He suggests that such a depiction weakens the idea of *Chathan* as a tool to oppose Brahminical hegemony (*Global South Colloquy)*.

The confusion of whether *Chathan* opposes or supports Brahmanical hegemony has its roots in the plot twist of the film. In the film, *Chathan*, traditionally a subaltern subject, resides within the deceased Brahmin body of Kodumon Potti and acts through it. The ever-evolving dichotomy of oppressed and oppressor stemming from the caste/class hierarchy existing in society, as observed in the review by Arya Suresh for *The Quint*, gets disrupted by this discrepancy. A similar disruption of dichotomy can be observed in the character of the Cook (played by Sidharth Bharathan) as well.

Chathan as the Oppressor and the Oppressed

As per *Tantric* lore, *Chathan* is a spirit that can be summoned to fulfil one's desires. The most renowned depictions of *Chathan* are found in *Aithihyamala*, a compilation of Kerala's legends and stories by Kottarathil Sankunni, published in 1909. One such story features an upper-caste *Tantric* practitioner named Panchanalloor Bhattathiri, who commands the obedience of approximately 400 *Chathans*. Delhi-based journalist Charmy Harikrishnan rightly said, "The Chathans are, in fact, a horde of supernatural servants or even slaves that quite mirrors the lower caste-upper caste power dynamics in society" (Rajendran).

In *Bramayugam*, Chudalan Potti, an ancestor of Kodumon Potti and a scholar of *Atharva Veda*, undertakes rigorous fasts and summons Goddess *Varahi.* Pleased with Potti's devotion, the goddess gifts him a magical box containing a *Chathan* and vanishes after declaring that the *Chathan* will fulfil all of Potti's wishes. Potti, however, enslaves the *Chathan*, causing it immense suffering. The fundamental feature of hegemonic masculinity is the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt). In this light, considering the history of *Chathan* in the folklore of Kerala, generally portrayed as a male, traditionally subservient figure, coupled with the

enslavement of *this entity* by Chudalan Potti in the movie, it can be said that *Chathan* belongs to the oppressed category in the dichotomy.

Arya Suresh notes in her review that the once-oppressed turn into oppressors cyclically till a new power comes forth that displaces the hierarchy once more (*The Quint).* True to this, recognising that Potti's caste identity would provide it with the greatest social power, the once-oppressed *Chathan* becomes the oppressor by living and acting in the body of Kodumon Potti. The power *Chathan* wields is thus not just magical but also of Brahmanical hegemony. Brahmanical hegemony, referring to the dominance of Brahmanical ideology and its institutions, has been instrumental in shaping the social, political, and cultural structures of Indian society throughout history. This hegemony was evident in medieval Kerala as well, where Brahmins, who were positioned at the top of the caste hierarchy, enjoyed numerous privileges. These privileges included the performance of religious rituals and access to education and knowledge, which further reinforced their dominant position within society.

The concepts of class and caste are closely intertwined. True to this, Brahmins not only held a dominant position in the caste hierarchy but also occupied a significant one within the class structure. Through traits such as strength, courage, aggression, and the capacity to provide and protect, Kodumon Potti becomes the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in the film. He possesses the wealth, knowledge, and power associated with his high caste and wields control over both the Cook and Thevan.

Thevan belongs to the caste community in Kerala called *paanan,* who visited houses on special occasions and sang with a *thudi*, a native percussion. He seeks refuge from the slave trade in the *mana* owned by Kodumon Potti. The dynamics between Kodumon Potti

and Thevan underscore that masculinity is not a monolithic construct but varies across caste and social classes. Despite both being men, their differing societal positions result in a clear oppressor-oppressed dynamic. From his first encounter with Kodumon Potti, Thevan willingly assumes a subordinate role. The power dynamics between them are vividly portrayed in the scene where they first meet. Kodumon Potti is depicted seated, wielding a stick, while Thevan stands outside the *mana*, his head bowed in deference. He raises his gaze to meet Potti's only when given explicit permission. The irony in this hegemony lies in the fact that *Chathan* lives inside Kodumon Potti's body. As *Chathan* is a subservient character as per *Tantric* lore, the Potti subsequently becomes the oppressed. However, the caste hierarchy of the time makes Potti the oppressor, albeit it is the *Chathan.*

Such discrepancy can be observed in the dynamics between the Cook and the Potti as well. The Cook is secretly half-Brahmin, but due to the caste and class system that existed at the time, the *Chathan* in the body of the Potti becomes the master and the Cook, though part-Brahmin, becomes the slave. The master-slave dynamics is evident when the Cook is put into place by Potti, who spits on him and says, "What does a meagre Cook know about music. Step away"(20:26). This reinforces the notion that knowledge of classical music and its evaluation are privileges reserved for the upper class. The irony lies in the fact that this is said to a part- Brahmin, who is supposedly eligible for the knowledge of music, by a subservient mythical figure, who is not. Though these dynamics shift towards the end, for the most part of the film, these dynamics prevail, and point to the power class wields in defining masculine identity.

This complexity also affects the hierarchy of masculinity that creates the hegemonic masculinity in the movie. Kodumon Potti, being the Brahmin landlord, belongs to the highest

rank in the hierarchy and dominates the Cook and Thevan using the power of caste/class. The true identity of Potti, however, is that of a C*hathan,* who, according to *Tantric* lore, is a subservient figure and is traditionally associated with marginalised communities. This positions *Chathan* in the same rank as Thevan, who it physically and verbally controls throughout the movie with the power of the Brahmanical identity. Moreover, the Cook is part-Brahmin, and in the 17th century, where the film is set, Brahmins wielded most power. Yet, as he is the Cook, as per the hierarchy dictated by class, *Chathan* disguised as the master of the *mana,* becomes the master of the Cook as well. Thus, contradictorily, both men get dominated and controlled by a man who is actually either in the same rank or below them due to the privilege of residing in a Brahmin body. Such contradiction in the hierarchy of masculinity underscores the role of caste or class in the determination of hegemonic masculinity.

The Cook: The Half Brahmin

Unlike the *Chathan* whose discrepancy in the dichotomy partly has roots in the folklore, the complexity in the case of the Cook is purely based on caste and class. Gramsci's understanding of power is fundamentally based on two aspects of power relations – *Dominio*/coercion and *Direzione*/consensus (Ramos). The caste system in India, a form of social stratification, exemplifies *Dominio*, where an individual's social status is predetermined. On the other hand, *Direzione* is represented by the actions and decisions of individuals, which are influenced by their class circumstances. The Cook, born to a Brahmin father and a sweeper mother, not only harbours a desire for revenge but also inherits a sense of superiority from his Brahmin lineage. The caste system in India dictates him as the superior Brahmin, but the class system labels him as a Cook or slave. Though his mixed

Sudra and Brahmin lineage remains hidden until the film's climax, subtle clues hint at his higher caste status. His posture and dialogue throughout the film occasionally take on an authoritative tone, particularly when interacting with Thevan, a member of a lower caste. This can be attributed not only to the internal hierarchy within lower castes but also to his partial Brahmin lineage.

While Thevan acknowledges their shared status as "Puppets, swaying to the master's tune" (45:44), the Cook's behaviour deviates significantly from the expected submissiveness. True to his half-brahmin identity, he explicitly asserts his superiority over Thevan, stating, "Who are you to command me? A lowlife who survived on the scraps of some palace! A mere moth that came rushing towards the sight of a flame" (45:25). The Cook also exhibits a boldness uncommon among lower castes by talking back to Potti, the ostensible master. This behaviour stems from his recognition of Potti's true identity: the disguised *Chathan*, traditionally subservient to Brahmins.

Being Potti's son and as someone who is aware of Potti's true identity and lineage, the Cook exhibits defiance by disobeying Potti's orders, such as refusing to lower his head when asked to and serving liquor from the cellar with an air of ownership. This subversion stems from his concealed Brahmin status, which grants him a sense of empowerment, and challenges the expected master-servant dynamic of the caste system. However, Potti consistently asserts his dominance over the Cook through physical intimidation and verbal abuse. For instance, when Potti asks the Cook if he fears death, he defiantly lifts his head and replies 'no', displaying a hint of authority. This defiance angers Potti, who feels compelled to reassert his control. He commands the Cook, 'Keep your head down, you dog' (50:35). The Cook refuses to comply, which enrages Potti, and he uses his magical power to choke him,

forcing him to his knees at Potti's feet. This creates a complex situation where the Cook enjoys a certain level of hidden ability to act independently while simultaneously adhering to outward social conventions. Though the social conventions state that being a Brahmin gives a person the hegemony over low castes, due to his hidden Brahmin identity and the knowledge of *Chathan's* evil identity, the Cook is forced to oscillate between subservience and authority.

"Hegemonic masculinity" is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (Connell). True to this observation, the basic premise of hegemonic masculinity- the hierarchy of masculinity- gets questioned in the characterisation of the Cook and *Chathan* in the movie. It is the constant struggle to maintain the dominance of power that leads to the creation and disruption of the hierarchy of masculinity in the film. The movie defines masculinity as a socially constructed, multidimensional variable that can shift and evolve, depending on the cultural context and time. It is recast as it intersects with race, class, sexuality, caste, and other components of identity.

Chathan, traditionally submissive and under the control of his Brahmin master Chudalan Potti, presents a compelling narrative of power dynamics. Exhausted by the inhumane treatment of his master, *Chathan* absorbs his soul and assumes the identity of his successor, Kodumon Potti. Inhabiting the body of a deceased Brahmin, it experiences a newfound power over Thevan and the Cook. This transformation illustrates a significant shift in power dynamics, where the oppressed becomes the oppressor. The character thus underscores the notion that dominance and power are not merely associated with being a man but are intricately linked to specific behaviours and ways of being.

Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting (Connell and Messerschmidt). The character of the Cook also adds an intriguing dimension to the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the narrative. Born a part-Brahmin, he has a higher social status than Thevan and holds the potential to control *Chathan*. However, this privilege is curtailed by his guise as a cook. This restriction, however, does not prevent his inherent hegemony from surfacing intermittently throughout the film. His interactions with Thevan and Potti oscillate between submissiveness/equality and authority, positioning him neither at the apex nor the nadir of the caste/class division depicted in the film, but rather in an ambiguous middle ground. This challenges the conventional dichotomy of hegemony and casts a veil of uncertainty over his masculine identity.

Hegemonic masculinity, as defined by RW Connell, has come a long way. The concept constantly evolves based on historical, cultural, and social contexts, ensuring that it is not trapped in reification. Specific to Kerala, a major component altering the fundamentals of hegemonic masculinity is the caste/class hierarchy. The emergence of the supposed 'middle class', like the part-Brahmin Cook, created hybridised caste identities and was one of the components that created ambiguity in the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed in medieval Kerala. Redefining hegemonic masculinity based on such ambiguities is crucial in the creation of an egalitarian society.

Such an understanding underscores Connell's observation in her book *Masculinities* that "To understand gender, we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender. Gender relations are a major component of social structure as a whole" (76). With its

predominantly male cast, *Bramayugam* provides a platform to explore the diverse dimensions of masculinity, enabling men to re-evaluate the challenges they face and heighten their awareness of situations where roles are reversed. This also opens up spaces for reflection about how not just women but also men can be disempowered or marginalised. Understanding how men view themselves in relation to women and other men is crucial for encouraging their involvement. It reiterates the need for gender-sensitive policy to include the involvement of men in strategies for empowering women.

The media's representation of gender serves as a significant medium through which the public learns about gender roles during their socialisation process. Films, in particular, exert a profound and cyclical influence on social culture. They subtly alter the audience's worldview through the repeated presentation of distinct patterns, often blurring the lines between the constructed reality within the film and actual social reality. Exemplifying this, *Bramayugam*, set against the backdrop of stark black-and-white cinematography, invites audiences into a realm where the supernatural intersects with social structures (Gupta). This highlights the potential of movies as a medium for creating awareness about power dynamics within the broader framework of gender relations. The film also serves as a starting point for further research in this area and can aid in promoting equality within and between genders.

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Reclaiming Cultural Narratives: Gendered Censorship and Representation in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi*

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Abstract: *Tawaif*, a term referring to courtesans and female entertainers who held significant sway in the cultural landscape of pre-colonial and colonial India, has left an indelible mark on the country's artistic and intellectual traditions. The research explores the evolution of the *tawaif* in Indian cinema, focusing on their historical contributions to the culture and how colonialism and societal shifts marginalised them. Once esteemed as highly skilled artists who preserved Indian classical arts, *tawaif* were reduced to symbols of sexual deviance, losing their revered status. Through an analysis of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi*, a series set in Lahore's red-light district during the Indian freedom struggle, this paper interrogates how contemporary narratives, particularly in cinema, perpetuate or challenge patriarchal interpretations of the *tawaif* figure. Utilising frameworks of agency, chastity, cultural appropriation, sensuality, the male gaze, and stereotypes, the study critiques Bhansali's depiction of *tawaif* as embodying a form of gendered censorship, reshaping their identities to fit modern fantasies. This paper aims to reclaim the silenced voices of *tawaif* by deconstructing

these portrayals and offering a nuanced understanding of their sexuality, artistic expression, and social influence.

Keywords: *Tawaif culture, Tawaif trope, Indian Cinema, Gendered Censorship, Agency, Sexuality*

Generations of silenced voices and untold stories yearning for recognition encapsulate the *tawaif*, a journey from revered performing artists to marginalised fallen women. Often shrouded in the whims and fancies of patriarchy, their identity was misrepresented for centuries by the mass media and obfuscated by academic works. *Tawaif,* being the custodians of culture and the forerunners of the classical vocal forms *of Thumri, Kajri, Hori, Dadra, Ghazal,* and the classical dance form *Kathak*, now remain disgraced yet ostracised figures surviving on the margins. The gendered censorship that they have faced can be widely located in most of the movies ranging from *Umrao Jaan* and *Pakeezah* to *Devdas,* all of which stigmatise them as prostitutes.

The *tawaif* were professional female performers active in north India between the 18th and early 20th centuries. They were highly skilled musicians, dancers, and poets, serving as custodians of Indian classical art forms and Urdu literature. *Tawaif* is regarded as superior to both prostitutes and street entertainers such as *natnis* and *nautankiwalis*. They consider their expertise in classical music and dancing to be a source of great prestige, and the most extraordinary nobility funded and attended their performances, which took place in the secluded settings of the courts, *mehfils* (soirees), or *kothas* (salons). *Tawaif* were fluent in reading and writing and were well-versed in literature and politics. In a patriarchal society, they wielded more power than most men could even dream of. They belonged to precolonial India's highest taxpayers bracket. Despite their cultural significance, the *tawaif* culture has often been censored and marginalised in mainstream narratives. The marginalisation of the

culture reflects broader patterns of silencing and erasure of women's contributions to the arts and society.

The advent of British colonial rule in India profoundly transformed *tawaif 's* societal perception and status. *Tawaif 's* was a thorn in the eye of the British government. The imposition of Victorian morality, along with colonial policies aimed at restructuring Indian society, led to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of *tawaif.* The Anti-Nautch Movement, which sought to suppress the public performances of courtesans, depicted them as embodiments of moral decay and social corruption. This movement, supported by British officials and Indian reformists alike, significantly undermined the *tawaifs'* status, relegating them to the fringes of society and tarnishing their cultural contributions. Despite the adversities imposed by colonial rule, the legacy of the *tawaif* in the realm of Indian arts and culture remains profound.

The *tawaif,* a once-integral part of South Asian society, has largely vanished, but its legacy lingers in the enduring courtesan trope of Bollywood. Iconic films like *Umrao Jaan*, *Pakeezah*, and *Mughal-e-Azam* often portray the *tawaif* as a tragic figure, a fallen woman doomed to social exclusion. These narratives conclude with heavy-handed morality lessons, reinforcing societal norms. Marriage remains perpetually unattainable for these characters, and redemption appears contingent upon their demise or a complete repudiation of their courtesan identity. However, the mass media's fascination with the courtesan trope goes beyond mere storytelling; it exploits the allure of sexuality to draw in audiences. These sexualised portrayals, particularly of young women, cater to the desires and manipulate the attention of viewers for commercial gain. This approach not only trivialises the multifaceted lives of historical *tawaifs* but also risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes that can be detrimental to contemporary women.

There are multiple research papers that have extensively studied *tawaif* culture and the *tawaif* trope, but none have dwelt with the Netflix series *Heeramandi* concerning the concept of gendered censorship. This paper critically analyses how Bhansali's depiction of *tawaif* in *Heeramandi*, while seemingly progressive, ultimately aligns with patriarchal narratives that reinforce gender stereotypes. It delves into the historical and cultural significance of *tawaifs* in pre-colonial India, mainly focusing on their often-overlooked role in preserving and transmitting artistic traditions. This research seeks to achieve a three-fold objective. First, it will reconstruct *th*e historical and cultural context of *tawaif* culture in pre-colonial India. This will involve highlighting their artistic contributions and social standing, which are often overshadowed by the derogatory label of the prostitute. The study will critically examine the portrayal of *tawaif* in *Heeramandi*. This will identify how the series negotiates themes of female sexuality, agency, and artistic expression. Finally, the research will analyse how Bhansali's representation aligns with, or subverts, the prevailing misconceptions and gendered censorship surrounding *tawaif* in contemporary India. Through a multi-pronged approach, this study seeks to reclaim the silenced narratives of *tawaif* and shed light on their multifaceted roles in Indian society.

The *tawaif* trope, embodying allure and mystique depicted in opulent settings, has captivated Bollywood since its inception. The *mujra* (an exotic dance of *tawaif*), song, and the courtesan with a golden heart was a stereotypical staple Bollywood was cashing on. The Indian film industry and the audience have had a decades-long fascination with courtesan culture; from the movies *Mughal-e-Azam* to *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan*, the trope of *tawaif* performing sleazy and titillating dance numbers prevailed. Bhansali's *Heeramandi* is no exception from this. *Heeramandi* has garnered significant attention for its opulent visuals and dramatic storytelling. It dwells on the intricate world of *tawaif* in the red light district

Heeramandi, Lahore (currently in Pakistan), in the backdrop of India's freedom struggle. The courtesans decked in ornate and intricate outfits and jewellery were idealised figures of beauty, captivating audiences with their mastery of music and dance.

Courtesans, although bound by a sisterhood, are at each other's throats and are forever scheming to claim a *sahab* (patron) for sexual favours and wealth or to get married. Mallikajaan's doubting of Waheeda for stealing money and her frisking and stripping is an alibi for the rage, revenge, and longing that *tawaif* internalises in the long run ('Mallikajaan' 13: 06). This depicts a precarious relationship that *kotha* encapsulates wherein people cannot believe each other and always wishes for one's demise. The putrefied mother-daughter relation Alamzeb and Mallikajaan share demarcates the moral decadence of *khotas*. Female friendship and camaraderie in *tawaif 's* life are less idealized in film and often remain almost invisible (Vanita 44). The palatial havelis, ornate and intricate outfits, and jewellery portrayed in the series thrive on opulent otherworldliness from beginning to end, creating a fantasy chimera, a celluloid courtesan, that is a far cry from the real *tawaif*. The female-centered narratives revolving around the life of *tawaif* depict them as women wielding a certain level of independence and control within the confines of their profession.

They are shown to be financially independent, hold sway over powerful men, and even engage in witty banter. However, this agency is ultimately superficial. The *tawaifs'* choices are limited by the patriarchal society they inhabit. Their power stems solely from their ability to entertain men, and their freedom is an illusion carefully constructed within the boundaries of male desire. Zulfikar Saheb's threat to Mallikajaan of being found as a naked dead body in the fountain establishes that *tawaif* is on a leash connected to a halter that rests with *sahab* ('Waheedajaan' 44:27). They are like fishes in a pond having the utmost freedom and agency in water but beyond it, they will stifle to death. Bibbojaan's remark that courtesans are "birds

in gilded cages fluttering their wings dreaming of flying high" asserts the inevitability of the patriarchal constraints that are overmasting upon them ('Mallikajaan' 25:08). The narrative structure of *Heeramandi* consistently places male characters in positions of power reinstating the notion that in most Bombay film women play second fiddle to men (Vanita 6). The nawabs Zulfikar, Tajdar, Wali Mohammed, and the British official Cartwright all exercise tremendous power in the society. The only exception is Qudsia Begum; though she demands considerable status in society, being a *nawabsaadi* (lady), she is still at the mercy of her son.

In the background of the opulent setting, dazzle, and grandeur, there exists a reality concealed beneath the message of empowerment. Patrons, politicians, and even family members exert considerable influence over the lives of the *tawaif*. The choices available to women are often constrained by these external forces, revealing that their supposed autonomy is limited and conditional. This reinstates that a woman's identity in Indian cinema is sexually, socially, and economically definable regarding her relationship with one or more respectable males (Booth 1). The *tawaif,* according to Bhansali, are mere puppets in the hands of unctuous nawabs who serve their foreign overlords for titles and protection. But in reality, the courtesans call the tunes, shielding their patron's secrets and, on occasion, leading them to ruin. They were well-read women of their time, educated and accomplished, and had survived the changing times on their terms; they did not require people's savings (Diwan). However, Bhansali decides otherwise and strangely shows them in a derogatory light, leaving people with the impression that they are illiterate women scheming for mere sexual favours. *Heeramandi* presents a sanitised version of *tawaif* life that caters to a romanticised notion that serves male fantasies rather than offering a grounded historical perspective. Bhansali's portrayal aligns more with his understanding of ideal womanhood, imposing a subtle form of gendered censorship that dictates how women should be perceived.

Bhansali's directorial style is characterised by its lush visuals and elaborate costumes, which are aesthetically pleasing but contribute to the objectification of the *tawaif*. Throughout the plotline, the character of the courtesan is portrayed as the epitome of raw sexual power and pleasure. The *Gajagamini walk* (walk solid and regal as that of a female elephant) mentioned in Kamasutra as the walk of pure seduction is perfected by Bibbojaan. The sequence started with Bibbojaan decking the stage, followed by intentional teasing lyrics aimed at Nawab for sexually arousing him ('Mallikajaan' 08:24). Bhansali establishes voluptuousness, curvaceousness, and elegant dispositions as the traits of a *tawaif*. Through the portrayal, he dictates the standards of an ideal Indian woman to be voluptuous and curvaceous, which pleases the eyes of men. This explicit sex appeal is not the reality, as there are many paintings of courtesans, and they never show cleavage. But in all Hindi cinema, there will be a hole in their clothes for cleavage, and unfortunately, this stays in public memory, the tight outfits and heaving bosom with titillating dance (Chaturvedi).

In a scene from *Heeramandi*, Fareedan provocatively guides Nawab Wali Mohammad's hand over her bosom, cracking a sly joke about the arrow hitting the right spot (Waheedajaan 23:00). *Tawaif 's* every action becomes a strive to anticipate and exceed the expectations of their patrons. Their beauty, wit, and even their emotional vulnerabilities are all presented as tools for captivating the male audience. Thus, the cinematic *tawaif* becomes shapeshifters, becoming all things to all men (Kidwai). The camera lingers on their bodies, their dance performances are overtly sexualised, and their conversations with men are often framed around seduction. This constant objectification reduces the *tawaif* to mere objects of male desire, stripping them of their autonomy and individuality. The series frequently employs the male gaze, presenting the women as objects of desire rather than fully realised individuals. The unrelenting obsession with sex appeal, paired with coyness, creates a captivating image.

The seductive play with expressive, frightened doe eyes further accentuates this. This cinematic approach reinforces that their primary value lies in their physical appearance and ability to entertain and please men. The sensuality depicted in the series is not a form of self-expression for the courtesans but rather a performance for the male characters and, by extension, the male audience. This performance is carefully curated to fit a specific mould of desirability, leaving little room for women to express their sexuality on their terms. The result depicts sensuality as more about conforming to male expectations than genuine empowerment. Thus, the courtesans in Indian cinema are given the image of the purveyors of voyeurism under the guise of entertainment (Sengupta 130). This objectification undermines the series' purported message of empowerment, instead perpetuating a view of women as passive recipients of male attention and desire. The *tawaifs'* agency is superficial, limited to their roles within the *kotha*, and defined by their relationships with men. The male gaze constrains their independence and autonomy, dictating their actions and behaviours. This portrayal reinforces patriarchal norms, suggesting that women's worth and agency are tied to their ability to please and serve men. This sanitised sensuality reinforces the idea of the *tawaif* as desirable yet unattainable, perpetuating a male fantasy rather than reflecting the realities of their lives.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi* is a visually captivating series, yet it fails to deliver a genuine representation of *tawaif 's* reality. Bhansali's imagination of *tawaif* seems to prioritise sexual titillation over nuanced characterisation. The series portrays them as melancholic victims yearning for patriarchal married bliss while remaining marginalised in respectable society. Mallikajaan's remark that books can only be a hobby for courtesans establishes the stereotype ('Mallikajaan 19:15). These women should be remembered as celebrated figures filled with joy, gusto, and spiritedness. The courtesans, or *tawaif*, of

Heeramandi were more than just entertainers; they were the epitome of culture and sophistication. Trained in the fine arts, they were poets, musicians, and dancers who played a pivotal role in the social and cultural life of the Mughal courts. The *tawaif* were well-read women of their times, educated and accomplished. Historically, *tawaif* were complex figures who navigated a challenging social landscape, exercising agency in various ways. They were not merely entertainers but also cultural and intellectual contributors who wielded a certain degree of influence. To become successful *tawaif*, they had to undergo rigorous training in literature, music, dance, and the art of conversation. They commanded great respect in the court and society, and their association bestowed prestige on those invited to their salons for cultural soirees (Arfeen 1100).

Bhansali's interpretation, however, reduces these multifaceted individuals to simplistic stereotypes. The series overlooks the socio-political context that shaped the lives of *tawaifs*, opting instead for a narrative that fits Bhansali's artistic sensibilities. This distorts historical truth and perpetuates a limited understanding of women's roles in society, reinforcing the idea that their worth is tied to their ability to conform to male-defined standards. The series questions even their education, with Rahanaabba enquiring Mallikajaan how far she could count just before her homicide ('Fareedanjaan' 01:18). *Heeramandi*'s portrayal of *tawaif* is ahistorical. It borrows heavily from popular imagination and fictional accounts, neglecting the rich historical scholarship. The series homogenises the experiences of *tawaif* across different regions and eras, erasing the diversity of their social and cultural lives. This cultural appropriation reinforces stereotypes and prevents a nuanced understanding of these women.

Sufi *Kathak* exponent Manjeri Chaturvedi, reflecting on the disparity society has inflicted on women, especially in artistry, remarked that male performers were being called *ustads*. However, the females were not given the same respect and were called *naachnewali*

(*Indian Express*). Bhansali's portrayal of *tawaifs* in *Heeramandi* is steeped in the stereotype of them being the *randhi* (whore) that reinforces traditional societal norms. Tajdar's reaction to Alamzeb's profession and her denying of being a courtesan speaks volumes about their social acceptance ('Tajdar' 02:08). The very old debate in Indian cinema of *tawaif* being associated with the notions of sacred or profane and purity or pollution is reinforced in the plot (Ansari 1099). *Heeramandi* reduces them to mere objects of male desire, reinforcing the stereotype of the *tawaif* as a seductress, existing primarily for male consumption. The famous dialogue of Mallikajaan, "You call us *tawaif*, we are artists. We perform art forms, and you reduce us to mere entertainers," inspires us to believe the series to be an empowering tale. Still, the next second, with her enthralling performance in the court, confirms the stereotypical notion of *tawaif* being full of ploy ('Waheedajaan' 03:42). The series perpetuates societal norms by presenting the *tawaif* through the lens of the male gaze. Their agency is superficial, limited to their roles within the confines of the *kotha*, under the control of male patrons and the societal structures that bind them. This portrayal not only diminishes their historical significance but also reinforces patriarchal norms that dictate women's roles and behaviours. Conforming to these stereotypes, Bhansali reduced the *tawaif* to mere dancers in his big-budget rendition of history. The reflection is witnessed in the dialogue, "Think like a patriot, and not like one who performs *mujra*," says Bibbo Jaan ('*Heeramandi*' 21:46), highlighting the stereotypical image that Bollywood has built up.

Heeramandi establishes a binary between the archetypal *pativrata* (devoted wife) and the *vyabhicharini* (whore), with *tawaif* occupying the latter category. The dichotomy is a recurring theme in Indian cinema; *Heeramandi* is no exception. Bhansali uses this dichotomy to juxtapose them against the ideal virtuous wife, creating a tension that underscores the series' gender politics. In *Heeramandi*, the *tawaif* is depicted as *vyabichari*, transgressing

societal norms and embodying sensuality and freedom. The *tawaif 's* are always the other of the noble wives who are the epitome of purity and chastity. Zulfikar taunts Mallikajaan for practicing 'divide and rule' creating tension in the household ('Mallikajaan' 10:16). The fact that Nawab Zorawar resorts to a lady named Saba Rahmani when it comes to marriage while proposing love to Lajjo, it serves as a clear indication of the status of *tawaif* in society. His remark that a *tawaif* should consider nawab's insolence as a favour dictates their inferior status ('Fareedanjaan' 29:30). The freedom of courtesans is superficial, as their lives are still dictated by the desires and whims of their male patrons. On the other hand, the *pativrata* is idealised and placed on a pedestal, representing societal ideals of womanhood. This dichotomy serves to reinforce gender norms rather than subvert them.

Despite their apparent independence, the *tawaif* are ultimately portrayed as tragic figures, their lives marred by the absence of male protection and societal acceptance. This portrayal subtly reinforces that women's worth is tied to their relationship with men, whether as devoted wives or courtesans under male patronage. Within conventional narrative structures, the control of a heroine's body is almost always transferred directly from her family to her husband, regardless of who chooses the husband (Booth 7). This reinforces a patriarchal view of female sexuality, where women are either chaste and submissive or ostracised for their desires. In the conventions of Hindi cinema, *devi* is sexually, socially, and economically definable in terms of her relationship to one or more respectable males. At the same time, *baiji* or *tawaif* is posited as the other (Booth 9). Bhansali's fixation with the ritual of *nath utrai* (selling of virginity) adheres to societal norms of women's value being rested on her chastity and virginity. The initiation ceremony for *tawaif* into the *Kotha* was a significant cultural event. This ritual was part of a larger celebration that welcomed the new *tawaif* into the community of artists and signalled her readiness to engage in the sophisticated cultural

practices of the *kotha*. The series focuses on the beauty and allure of the *tawaif*, neglecting the complexities of their lives. Their agency is limited to their performances and romantic entanglements, erasing their potential roles as artists, poets, and intellectuals.

Bhansali's depiction of *tawaif* in *Heeramandi* also raises issues of cultural appropriation and historical inaccuracy. The series appropriates the rich cultural heritage of the *tawaif*, using their aesthetic and cultural practices to create a visually captivating narrative. By the 1970s, real-life *kotha* had vanished, so filmmakers had little knowledge about them. With this, the sense of courtesan as an educated person and kotha as a way of life also disappeared (Vanita 56). *Heeramandi*'s trailer has a statement about recreating history. Bhansali should not have made such a statement, remarked Chaturvedi. The renowned actor Ushna Shah calls the series a cultural appropriation. The appropriation comes at the cost of historical inaccuracy and depth. In his series, Bhansali depicts *tawaif* as someone who aspires to free themselves from the shackles of *kotha* as the remark, "Death brings *tawaif* freedom." The rendition of the song "We Seek Freedom" just after the demise of Lajjo can be overlooked as their heart-wrenching cry for freedom from the *twaif 's* life ('Fareedanjaan' 35:16). But in reality, the courtesan owned their fate and often amassed great power to realise their dreams. They enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, and were the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends (Oldenburg 260). With its garb of empowerment, the series often cast *tawaif* as *abla nari* (weak woman). Still, they were empresses of Heeramandi and amassed tremendous power that most men could ever dream of.

The *tawaifs* in *Heeramandi* are depicted through a lens that prioritises visual spectacle over historical reality. Their cultural practices, including music, dance, and poetry, are showcased as exotic and alluring, but their historical significance and contributions are largely

overlooked. This appropriation reduces their rich cultural heritage to mere aesthetic elements, stripping them of their historical context and agency. Furthermore, Bhansali's depiction of *tawaif*s reflects his understanding and interpretation, often at odds with historical reality. The *tawaif* are portrayed as passive objects of male desire rather than active cultural agents with significant influence and agency. This depiction not only distorts historicity but also reinforces gendered stereotypes that limit women's roles and contributions. Zarina Begum, the last remaining *tawaif*, recounted her experiences of a bygone era that now resembles a fantastical dream. Her lifestyle mirrored that of an empress, characterised by wealth and opulent extravagance. The suggestion that *tawaif*s were solely a source of entertainment for the nobility is demonstrably false. Begum Samru, a former courtesan, ascended to the position of ruler over the Sardhana principality in western Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, Moran Sarkar, who became the wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, wielded considerable power within the royal household. The final Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah's first wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal, was not only a *tawaif* but also a pivotal figure in the 1857 Indian Rebellion (Vanita 6). These women were not just entertainers; they were educators, influencers, and sometimes revolutionaries who played a crucial role in shaping the history of their era.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi* does not fall far from the tree in offering a telltale of rivalry among courtesans with which Bollywood is preoccupied. The series aims to peel back the layers of fiction to reveal the real story of courtesans. It offers a vivid reimagining of the lives of *tawaif*, blending historical opulence with contemporary cinematic flair. This reimagining is not a faithful recounting of history but rather Bhansali's interpretation, which commodifies the past to suit modern viewership. Filmmakers of the subcontinent have created a fantasy chimera, a celluloid courtesan, which has nothing to do with *tawaif*. It has done no service to them. Bhansali is the biggest fantasy maker among them (Adil). *Heeramandi*, while

ostensibly presenting a narrative of female empowerment, ultimately conforms to colonial stereotypes and inscribes gendered censorship through its depiction of *tawaif*.

The series employs a double motif that superficially suggests female empowerment. On the surface, *Heeramandi* showcases *tawaif* as a strong, independent woman who navigates a male-dominated society with grace and intelligence. This facade of empowerment is compelling, providing viewers with a narrative that celebrates female strength and autonomy. Nevertheless, beneath this veneer lies a deeper conformity to the colonial narrative imposed by the British during the colonial era. The Britishers' reduction of *tawaif* to mere *nautch* girls or prostitutes is a stereotype that *Heeramandi* subtly perpetuates. This colonial portrayal diminishes their historical significance, reducing their complex identities to simplistic, commodified tropes. As a male director, Bhansali inscribes his terms of empowerment within the narrative, inherently shaping the portrayal of *tawaif* from a male perspective. The empowerment depicted in *Heeramandi* is thus conditional and limited, defined by the confines of their profession and their relationships with men. Reimagining history to fit a contemporary, aesthetically driven narrative, Bhansali commodifies the past, perpetuating stereotypes and societal norms. The series' emphasis on spectacle over substance obscures the true historical significance of *tawaif*, reducing their rich cultural legacy to a series of visually appealing but ultimately superficial depictions. This commodification of history serves to reinforce existing power structures and gender dynamics rather than challenging them. Hence, the courtesan remains an essential reference in any study on the evolution and commoditisation of women in India from ancient times to colonial and nationalist times, right up to the present day (Sengupta 137).

Heeramandi is a complex narrative encompassing a murder investigation, a war of succession, and a budding love story that, despite its claims of female empowerment,

ultimately reinforces colonial stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Bhansali's reimagining of *tawaif* history commodifies their past to suit contemporary viewership, presenting a double motif that superficially empowers women while conforming to the colonial portrayal of *tawaifs* as *nautch* girls or prostitutes. This portrayal, inscribed by a male perspective, employs a form of gendered censorship that dictates how women should be perceived and valued. By emphasising visual spectacle and sensuality, *Heeramandi* perpetuates a limited understanding of female empowerment and silences the authentic female narrative. In short, as noted by historians and cinema critic Usman, women in movies like Bhansali's *Devdas, Gangubai Kathiawadi*, and now *Heeramandi*, at first look, appear dreamy with gorgeous costumes and opulent settings. This unique Bollywood parody is significantly dissimilar from the actual lives of the courtesans (*Indian Express*).

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Hope in the Face of Adversity: Exploring the Resilient Human Spirit in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* offers a poignant exploration of displacement, identity, and resilience. While existing scholarship has delved into the novel's colonial and postcolonial dimensions, the role of hope as a central thematic force remains understudied. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the multifaceted nature of 'hope' as a driving force in the lives of its characters, revealing how it shapes their identities, relationships, and, ultimately, their destinies in the novel. Employing Hope Theory and drawing on insights from Postcolonial Feminist theory, this study will analyze how hope is experienced and expressed differently by male and female characters in the context of colonial oppression.

Keywords: *Afterlives, Abdulrazak Gurnah, identity, postcolonial literature, Hope Theory, postcolonial feminism, displacement.*

Hope is a powerful and complex emotional state with significant implications for human behaviour and resilience. The framework, Hope Theory, developed by psychologist Charles Snyder, posits that hope consists of cognitive processes that help individuals set and achieve goals. According to Snyder, hope involves the emotional experience of optimism and the cognitive ability to develop realistic pathways to desired outcomes. In contexts shaped by colonialism, hope takes on additional layers of meaning, particularly for those who have experienced the profound impacts of colonial systems, both men and women.

Colonialism has historically disrupted social structures, economies, and cultures, leaving

deep scars on the colonised populations. As Ashis Nandy asserts, "Colonialism…is a system that dehumanizes both the colonised and the coloniser" (32). This dehumanisation often manifests in various ways, including the erosion of identity, dislocation from land, and loss of cultural practices. However, amidst this oppressive backdrop, hope emerges as a crucial mechanism through which individuals and communities navigate their realities and envision futures beyond colonial subjugation. The intersection of hope and colonialism raises essential questions about agency, identity, and resilience in the face of systemic oppression. In colonial settings, hope serves as both a coping mechanism and a catalyst for resistance. For colonised individuals, particularly women and marginalised groups, hope can inspire collective action and grassroots movements aimed at reclaiming autonomy and identity. This notion is particularly relevant in decolonisation efforts, where hope often transforms into a collective vision for liberation and self-determination.

While hope is a universal experience, its expression and implications can differ significantly based on gender. Women in colonised societies often bear the brunt of both colonial oppression and patriarchal structures, leading to unique challenges in fostering hope. For instance, women may find themselves navigating not only the loss of cultural identity but also gender-based violence and economic marginalisation. As bell hooks suggests, "Life-transforming ideas are always the product of an emotional and spiritual basis" (128). For many women, hope is intricately linked to their roles as caretakers, community leaders, and custodians of cultural heritage. This emotional and spiritual connection to hope can drive women to engage in activism, education, and community-building, thus reshaping the narrative

of colonial oppression.

In contrast, men in colonised societies may experience hope through different lenses. Often tasked with upholding family honour and social stability, men may feel pressure to respond to colonialism through resistance and militarisation. However, this expectation can lead to a dissonance between their roles as protectors and the realities of colonial power dynamics. As Edward Said notes, "The colonised are always caught in the paradox of wanting to resist but feeling the overwhelming power of the coloniser" (94). This duality complicates how hope manifests for men, creating tensions that can inspire action and lead to feelings of inadequacy or despair.

According to Snyder, hope comprises three key components: goals, pathways, and agency (8). In colonial contexts, these components are often intertwined with individuals' socio-political realities. The ability to set realistic goals becomes crucial for those impacted by colonialism. As Amartya Sen argues, "Poverty is not merely a lack of income; it is also the absence of capabilities (10). This highlights that the colonised may struggle to articulate their hopes and access the resources and pathways necessary to realise them.

Pathway thinking and developing strategies to achieve goals can be significantly hindered in colonial contexts. Structural barriers, such as limited access to education, economic resources, and political representation, often restrict individuals from envisioning feasible routes to their aspirations. However, despite these challenges, narratives of hope persist. Indigenous movements worldwide have demonstrated how hope can catalyse social change. For instance, the Zapatista movement in Mexico embodies a collective hope that seeks to reclaim

autonomy and dignity in the face of systemic oppression. The Zapatistas' emphasis on community empowerment illustrates how hope can be mobilised for collective action.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives* is a poignant exploration of the complexities of hope within the context of colonialism. Set in the backdrop of East Africa during the tumultuous periods of German and British colonial rule, the narrative delves into the lives of its characters as they navigate the intersections of personal loss, cultural displacement, and the enduring impacts of colonial violence. Gurnah's work not only reflects the trauma of colonial histories but also highlights the resilience and hope that emerge amid despair. At its heart is Khalifa, the son of an Indian businessman and an African woman, who excels in his studies. When the Germans colonised Tanzania, his fluency in German secured him a position at a local bank in Tanga. His skills attract the attention of Amur, a shady merchant who recruits him for illegal business dealings. After the deaths of his parents, Khalifa marries Asha, Amur's orphaned niece, in a union arranged without them ever meeting. Though their marriage begins well, Asha harbours resentment towards Amur, who exploited her father's loans to seize control of her home. Their relationship faces challenges when Asha suffers three miscarriages, leaving her unable to bear children. Meanwhile, Amur's son, Nassor, attends German trade schools and becomes a skilled woodworker, ultimately persuading Amur to purchase a woodworking shop for him. However, following Amur's sudden death, Nassor claims Asha's home despite her continued residence there.

Ilyas, a young Tanzanian who had fled and received education from the Germans, arrives in Tanga. Khalifa encourages him to reconcile with his parents, only to learn they have passed

away. He discovers he has a sister, Afiya, living in harsh conditions with relatives. Ilyas rescues Afiya and brings her to Tanga, where he teaches her literacy skills. Ilyas, believing in the benevolence of the Germans, joins the Askari to fight against the British. After a series of conflicts, he must return Afiya to their aunt's house, where she suffers abuse.

Hamza, another escapee from slavery, volunteers for the Askari. He faces rigorous training and becomes the personal servant of a German lieutenant who teaches him German, attracting ridicule from his peers. As World War I began, the Askari engaged in battle against British forces, initially experiencing victory at Tanga but suffering heavy losses as the conflict dragged on. The British blockade leads to shortages for the civilians in Tanga, forcing Khalifa to utilise his resourcefulness to help Nassor sustain his business by working with blockade runners. Over time, the British gained control without direct assault, and Tanga's residents adapted to their new rulers. Afiya worries for Ilyas, who has been absent for years. The German officers visit a missionary clinic, and as their situation worsens, many Askaris desert. Hamza is injured during this turmoil but is eventually rescued and returns to Tanga, where he seeks work and reunites with Khalifa, Asha, and Afiya, whom he finds himself drawn to. As the war concludes, Tanga begins to recover. Hamza's relationship with Afiya deepens, and they eventually marry, with Khalifa supporting their union. However, both face personal struggles: Hamza endures night terrors from his military experiences, while Afiya suffers a miscarriage that strengthens her independence. Asha is diagnosed with advanced kidney cancer and reconciles with Nassor's wife before her death. In the aftermath, Nassor expands his woodworking business and makes Hamza the manager, but in a twist of fate, Khalifa secures a

rental arrangement to remain in his home. Khalifa embraces his new role as a grandfather to Afiya and Hamza's son, also named Ilyas. The family finds a semblance of peace, though the younger Ilyas begins exhibiting unusual behaviour, suggesting he is communicating with his missing uncle. Hamza's quest to uncover the fate of his brother Ilyas leads him to write to the German doctor's wife, ultimately revealing that Ilyas had relocated to Germany and changed his name to Elias Essen. Tragically, he was arrested by the Nazis due to his interracial marriage and died in a concentration camp during World War II.

By keenly analysing the novel, the research identifies 'hope' as the central theme, and it affects the male and female characters distinctively. For male characters like Ilyas and Hamza, hope is often tied to freedom and agency, while female characters like Asha and Afiya experience hope as a means of empowerment and healing. Gurnah illustrates how each character's reliance on hope serves as a vital lifeline, shaping their survival and future in distinct ways. Ilyas seeks reconciliation, Hamza yearns for freedom, Asha desires healing, Afiya strives for empowerment, and Khalifa aims for stability. Together, their stories reveal the multifaceted nature of hope and its profound impact on their lives amidst the challenges of colonialism and war.

The literature review for this research is quite vast. However, most studies have focused on the decoloniality and postcoloniality of the text. Psychological analysis of the text and the characters has been done, but Hope as a central element has not yet been explored. In *An Analysis of Physical, Psychological and Emotional Abuse Children in 'Afterlives' by Abdulrazak Gurnah* by Khalid Muhammad, he talks about how the traumatic experiences of the

character have created a sense of fear in their minds, which in turn makes them weak and vulnerable. Nevertheless, this does not justify the happy ending and the characters' coping later in the novel to overcome their traumas.

By using the Monkey and the Shark fable, Alisha Mathers explores complex themes of colonialism, identity, and emotional resilience. In her *article 'I didn't bring my heart with me': Unfeeling as a mode of resistance in Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Afterlives,"* Mathers compellingly argues for the benefits of "unfeeling" as a survival strategy, it risks oversimplifying the emotional experiences of colonised subjects. By framing emotional detachment primarily as a means of resistance, it may overlook the potential psychological harm such detachment can inflict.

This has led to research on how the characters of the text tackle their traumas and colonial oppression. Since the study has identified a significant gap in the research that has already been done, this article focuses on analysing 'Hope' as the central element of the novel and how it shapes the characters and their future in the novel.

This research will use Hope Theory as its theoretical framework. The lens of hope theory posits that 'hope' is a crucial psychological resource that influences individuals' ability to cope with adversity and pursue their goals. Hope theory, articulated by Charles Richard Snyder, emphasises the importance of goal-setting, pathways, and agency in fostering hope. In *Afterlives,* characters navigate their traumatic pasts and uncertain futures by setting personal goals that reflect their hopes for reconciliation, freedom, healing, empowerment, and stability. This framework can be particularly useful for this research, as it allows for a nuanced exploration

of how the characters' hopes shape their identities, relationships, and responses to the oppressive realities of colonialism and war. By employing textual analysis as a methodology, this study delves into the intricate ways in which hope manifests in the lives of characters such as Ilyas, Hamza, Asha, Afiya, and Khalifa, revealing the complexities of their experiences and the broader socio-political context in which they exist.

In *Afterlives*, the characters Ilyas, Hamza, Asha, Afiya, and Khalifa rely on hope in distinct ways that shape their survival and resilience in a challenging colonial context. Khalifa, the first and foremost character in the novel, is constantly driven by his hopes of leading a peaceful and secure life. Khalifa's hope is rooted in his desire for stability and security in a tumultuous world:

> "Nobody owns anyone body and spirit. I learned that a long time ago. He had use of me while I lacked wisdom and the skill to run away, only even then I did not know enough to keep myself safe and ran away to war. If I felt shame it was for my father and my mother, but that only came later when I was older and knew more about shame myself. I came back to this town because there was nowhere else I knew. I wandered everywhere, doing work that was slowly killing me, and in the end I just drifted back here, I suppose" (78)

The narrator's first statement suggests a sense of agency. Despite his hardships, he asserts his autonomy and the right to make his own choices. His decision to run away from war, even though he lacked the necessary skills for survival, is a manifestation of this agency. Although the

narrator's past experiences have been fraught with challenges, he seems to maintain a sense of hope, indicated by his return to the town "because there was nowhere else I knew." This suggests that despite the difficulties, a better future might be possible, even if uncertain. The narrator's willingness to "wander everywhere" and "do work that was slowly killing me" demonstrates a certain level of resilience and determination. Despite the hardships, he continues to move forward, believing in his ability to overcome challenges and shape his destiny.

Khalifa's hope is intricately tied to his relationships with Asha, Afiya, and Hamza as he seeks to create a supportive environment for his family. A complex blend of duty and affection marks Khalifa's relationship with Asha. After marrying Asha, Khalifa becomes a source of stability for her amidst the turmoil of their lives. Asha, who suffers from advanced kidney cancer towards the end, finds hope in Khalifa's support and their shared aspirations for a better future despite the challenges they face. Khalifa's role as a provider and protector allows Asha to envision a life where she can make peace with her past and focus on their family's well-being. Despite its unconventional beginnings, his marriage to Asha symbolises a hope for unity and resilience. Initially, Asha appears as a country woman with no dreams or aspirations in life except to care for her family and get Afiya married. Later, Asha's hope for healing and reconciliation is evident in her desire to make peace with her past, especially with Nassor’s wife, with whom she has had a lifelong conflict. Khalifa's support provides Asha with a sense of stability and security, allowing her to focus on her family's well-being. This dynamic illustrates the goal-setting aspect of hope theory, as both characters strive for a semblance of normalcy and security in their lives.

Hamza's journey is marked by resilience and the pursuit of freedom. Initially escaping from slavery, Hamza volunteers for the Askari, a Tanzanian mercenary group, in hopes of finding autonomy and a sense of belonging. His character embodies the struggle against oppression and the desire for self-determination, central themes in the novel. Hamza's character reveals his life's goals, pathways, and agency interplay. His primary goal is to achieve freedom from the shackles of slavery and to carve out a life for himself in a society that is fraught with challenges. This aspiration drives him to enlist in the Askari, where he believes he can gain freedom, respect, and purpose. The hope of liberation fuels his determination to endure the harsh training and the brutal realities of war, illustrating the goal-setting aspect of hope theory.

As Hamza navigates his journey, the pathways component of hope theory becomes evident. His experiences in the Askari expose him to the camaraderie of fellow soldiers and the brutality of colonial warfare. Despite the violence and chaos surrounding him, Hamza finds moments of connection and support, particularly with characters like Khalifa and Afiya. These relationships provide him with alternative pathways to achieve his goals, offering emotional sustenance and a sense of community. For instance, when he returns to Tanga and begins working in the lumberyard, he impresses Khalifa. He gains a foothold in the community, further reinforcing his hope for a stable future.

Throughout the narrative, he demonstrates a strong sense of agency by making choices that align with his aspirations. For example, his decision to pursue a relationship with Afiya signifies his desire for personal happiness and connection despite the societal constraints they face. This relationship not only provides emotional support but also symbolises a shared hope

for a better future as they navigate their feelings amidst the backdrop of war and colonial oppression.

Moreover, Hamza's hope is continually tested by the harsh realities of his environment. The trauma of war, the loss of comrades, and the challenges of adapting to new circumstances all serve to challenge his resilience. However, in these moments of adversity, Hamza's hope becomes a driving force, propelling him to seek out new opportunities and forge meaningful connections with others. His eventual marriage to Afiya and the establishment of a family represent the culmination of his hopes and dreams as he strives to create a life filled with love and stability.

Afiya represents resilience and the quest for empowerment amidst the challenges of colonial oppression and personal trauma. As the younger sister of Ilyas, Afiya's life is marked by hardship, particularly after her brother rescues her from a difficult living situation at her foster parents' place. Her character evolves significantly throughout the narrative, showcasing her journey toward independence and self-discovery. Hope is crucial in Afiya's life, guiding her actions and shaping her relationships. Afiya's primary goal is to achieve independence and assert her identity in a society that often marginalises women. After moving in with Khalifa and Asha, she begins envisioning a future where she can develop her skills and contribute meaningfully to her community. This aspiration is particularly significant given her past experiences of abuse and neglect, which have left her feeling powerless. Afiya's hope for a better future drives her to pursue her education and hone her abilities as a seamstress, reflecting the goal-setting aspect of hope theory. Afiya’s biggest strength is her hope of her brother Ilyas

returning. That drives her entire character in the story. Even after years, she does not lose hope of meeting him again. If not for Ilyas, Afiya would have never survived her trauma and moved on in life.

Khalifa is a mentor and protector, encouraging Afiya to embrace her potential and pursue her dreams. Asha, despite her own struggles with illness, becomes a maternal figure for Afiya, providing emotional support and guidance. This nurturing environment allows Afiya to explore her talents and build her confidence. Additionally, her budding relationship with Hamza introduces another pathway to fulfilment as they navigate their feelings for one another amidst societal expectations. These relationships create a network of support that empowers Afiya to take steps toward achieving her goals.

The characters of Brother Ilyas and Younger Ilyas represent two perspectives on hope shaped by their experiences and circumstances. Brother Ilyas, who has undergone significant trauma and loss, embodies a more complex and often disillusioned view of hope. At the same time, Younger Ilyas, still in the formative stages of his life, represents a more innocent and aspirational form of hope. Brother Ilyas, who changes his name to Elias Essen after moving to Germany, experiences a profound sense of loss and disillusionment. His hope is initially rooted in believing he can build a new life in Germany after the war. However, this hope is shattered when he faces the harsh realities of racism and oppression, culminating in his arrest by the Nazis due to his relationship with a white woman. This experience illustrates the goal-setting aspect of hope theory, as systemic barriers thwart Ilyas's aspirations for a better life. His journey reflects a struggle to find pathways to achieve his goals, ultimately leading to a tragic end in a

concentration camp, where his hope for a future is extinguished.

Ilyas's agency is also significantly impacted by his circumstances. Initially, he believes he has the power to shape his destiny. However, as he confronts the brutal realities of life as a colonised individual in a foreign land, his sense of agency diminishes. The trauma he endures leads to a profound sense of hopelessness as he becomes a victim of forces beyond his control. This transformation highlights the fragility of hope when faced with overwhelming adversity, illustrating how Ilyas's experiences lead him to a place of despair rather than empowerment.

In contrast, Younger Ilyas represents a more hopeful and innocent perspective. As the son of Afiya and Hamza, he is born into a world filled with uncertainty and potential. His hope is characterised by a childlike curiosity and a desire to connect with his family, particularly with his missing uncle, Brother Ilyas. Younger Ilyas's goals are simple yet profound: he seeks to understand his family's history and to forge connections with those around him. The pathways available to Younger Ilyas are shaped by the supportive environment created by his parents and Khalifa, who regard him as a source of joy and continuity in their lives. His interactions with family members foster a sense of belonging and security, allowing him to explore his identity and aspirations. Unlike Brother Ilyas, who faces insurmountable obstacles, Younger Ilyas is encouraged to pursue his dreams, embodying the hopeful spirit of youth. He actively engages with his surroundings and expresses his thoughts and feelings. His habit of talking to himself, often in the voice of a woman asking for his uncle, signifies his desire to connect with his family's past and to make sense of his identity. This exploration of self and family reflects a hopeful outlook as he seeks to understand his place in a world marked by loss and trauma.

According to the analysis, it is clear that in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives,* the theme of hope is intricately woven into the characters' lives, shaping their survival and future in a colonial context marked by trauma and loss. The characters Ilyas, Hamza, Asha, Afiya, and Khalifa each embody different aspects of hope, influencing their journeys and highlighting the gendered dimensions of hope in their lives.

Khalifa's character represents the longing for stability and security amidst chaos. Asha's character embodies a profound struggle against personal and societal challenges. Afiya's character represents the hope of empowerment and self–discovery. Hamza's character embodies the hope of freedom and self-determination. Brother Ilyas represents the hope of reconciliation, familial connection, and young Ilyas's innocence. All these characters highlight the multifaceted nature of hope in overcoming adversity. Hope drives their connections and personal growth throughout their journeys, shaping their decisions amidst life challenges. By applying the Hope Theory, as developed by Charles Snyder, the study enabled a deeper understanding of how the characters set goals, develop pathways, and exercise agency within oppressive contexts. While the male characters employ hope for freedom and agency, female characters use hope to empower and heal. By highlighting the gendered dimensions of hope, the novel reveals how individuals navigate their aspirations and identities in a colonial landscape fraught with challenges.

Despite its contributions, this research also has limitations. While Hope Theory provides a useful framework, it may not fully account for the emotional complexity of the characters' experiences, particularly in the face of systemic oppression that can render hope fragile or

unattainable.

While this study provides a comprehensive exploration of hope within *Afterlives*, several avenues for further research can be pursued. A more extensive study on the implications of hope theory in contemporary post-colonial contexts would enhance our understanding of how historical traumas continue to influence present-day narratives of identity, agency, and resilience. Exploring how these themes manifest in other forms of media, such as film or visual art, could also provide a richer, more varied perspective on the enduring impact of colonialism on collective hope and identity.

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Rewriting War, Replacing Memory: Identity and Narrative in Sri Lankan Civil Literature.

Anna Thomas

Abstract: According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, colonisers replaced memory by removing people's traditional memory and substituting it with their own. Thus, the core memory of the natives was replaced by that of their colonisers. By erasing monuments and changing names of people and places, the colonisers 'replaced' memory of the colonised. On the psychological front, replaced memory can be defined as a branch of memory formed when individual memories intersect with collective memories during conflict. This phenomenon of replaced memory proves relevant in the case of human-initiated disasters such as wars. This paper will discuss the concept of replaced memory along with the construction of identity in the selected narratives of the Sri Lankan civil war, especially through the three types of memory- haptic, iconic and olfactory, and placing them against the socio-political and economic aspects of memory. The texts chosen for the study are: *The Story of a Brief Marriage* by Anuk Arudpragasam and *Tamil Tigress* by Niromi de Soyza.

***Keywords**: Replaced memory, Sri Lankan civil war, memorialisation*

The relationship between war and memory has been studied deeply in literary and historical discourse. Since the beginning, wars have profoundly impacted the lives of individuals, nations, and their memories. A nation is remembered through the wars they have fought and the lives that have been lost. It is to be emphasised that no war is fought abruptly. The causes of war lie dormant in a nation that needs to be triggered by an immediate cause. In the case of Sri Lanka, this dormant cause was ethnicity. It can rightly be called an ethnic

conflict more than a civil war. Apart from the political factors, the cognitive elements that caused the civil war in Sri Lanka were ethnic identity, group solidarity, historical narratives of groups, and collective memory.

The term "replaced memory" was initially introduced by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in the context of colonialism replacing the memory of the people. I propose to conceptualise the term “replaced memory” as a singular idea that will serve as a crucial tool in the exploration of memory as an act of survival and identity formation, through the selected narratives of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Sri Lankan Civil War primarily fought between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has left an indelible mark on the nation’s collective and individual memories. Hailed as the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean,” Sri Lanka is a cultural hotspot whose history is marked by ancient, advanced civilization and foreign occupations over time. The spark of conflict lay dormant in Sri Lanka for a long time before the civil war.

The Sinhalese settled in Sri Lanka around the fifth or sixth century B.C. The Dravidian Tamils soon followed them. The history of wars during those times was an extension of the folklore by the Buddhist elites, who succeeded in creating a nationalist ideology that has given them an Aryan heritage. The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505, and by then the north and northeast of the country were occupied by the Tamils (Sri Lankan Tamils and Moors), while the rest came under the Sinhalese.

In 1832, the British arrived and, introduced the divide and rule policy. The British highly favoured the minority communities at the expense of the majority community’s religion, language, and culture. They faced a labour shortage, which led them to recruit Tamils from India. English language schools were established in Jaffna, which imparted

education to the Tamils and the Tamils began to enter the civil service sectors because of their English education. Soon the Tamils overpowered the Sinhalese in the civil service sector. Nationalist sentiments had already begun spreading during the first half of the twentieth century among the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities. In 1948, Sri Lanka attained independence to become a dominion, and in 1972 it became a republic. Until then, it was known as Ceylon. The post-independence political atmosphere was shaped by ethnic majority-minority dynamics. In 1956, under Prime Minister Bandaranaike, the Sinhala Only Act was passed making Sinhala the only official language of the country. While religion was utilised early on for identity purposes as well as mobilising mechanisms, especially against the British, it was this act that created Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic animosity in the post-independence era (DeVotta).

The Sinhala-Tamil animosity escalated, which led to the 1956 race riots. In an attempt to pacify the situation, a pact was made between the Prime Minister and Tamil Federal Party leader known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957, which recognised Tamil as a minority language. The situation did not pacify the Tamils who wanted their language to have an equal status as Sinhala. Thus, the post-independence scenario witnessed the rise of Buddhism and Sinhala into a superior status, and their dominant politics led the country as an ethnocracy rather than a democracy. This alienated the Tamil-speaking minorities, leading to the ethnic riots in 1958. The Sinhalese government sought to remove the disparities that occurred due to British occupation of imparting education to the Tamils. As a result, the Tamils were denied equal weightage in university admissions and employment sectors. Sri Lanka also witnessed the colonisation of traditional Tamil lands by the government-initiated policies of resettlement. Colonisation in disputed territories succeeded so well that by the

1960s the government could create an entire new district in the east comprising nearly 80% Sinhalese (63).

Tamils felt alienated and lost faith in the politicisation of ethnic identities, even after the 1978 constitution recognised Tamil as an official language. This alienation fuelled Tamil mobilisation. Tamil militant groups began to appear on the scene during this time. Among them, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the most dominant, led by the founder of the group, Velupillai Prabhakaran. The purpose of LTTE was to build an independent Tamil state known as the Tamil *Eelam*. In 1983, the country saw the eruption of the LTTE attack that killed 13 soldiers of the Sri Lankan army. This resulted in the anti-Tamil pogrom known as the Black July which served as the immediate catalyst for the civil war that lasted till 2009.

Niromi de Soyza joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) outraged by the injustices inflicted on the Tamil minority. Her journey from a middle-class Tamil girl to one of the first female child soldiers in the Tamil Tigers is recounted in the narrative of *Tamil Tigress*. It reveals Niromi de Soyza's quest for justice as well as the personal challenges she faced, including death threats, loss, trauma, and haunting memories, during her time as a soldier in the LTTE. At the age of eight, Soyza was sent to live with her paternal grandmother, Appamma, in Jaffna, a Tamil stronghold. Later, her mother and sister joined her in Jaffna. When Soyza was twelve, she witnessed the beginning of war in her land.

She got disillusioned with the political atrocities that were being carried out by the government. Tamil houses were being raided, men were taken away, women were raped, properties were looted, and families were murdered for the sole reason of being Tamils. The previous memories of Jaffna, with its friendly and peaceful atmosphere devoid of misdoings,

get overshadowed by tension, violence, and injustice. The focus thus fell on the reason behind the atrocities and why a factor like ethnicity became a reason for war.

The term 'ethnic' originated from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning nation and *ethnikos* meaning 'heathen' or 'pagan'. Currently, the accepted definition for the term is 'relating to or belonging to a group of people who can be seen as distinct'. The distinction can be on a positive footing or a negative one. The question that requires attention is what creates this idea of distinction or difference. The Tamils in Sri Lanka, even though a minority, excelled in all spheres of public and social life. What made them different was the language they spoke along with the racial connotations fostered by the Aryan-Dravidian narratives. This explains the basis for ethnicity; they are Tamil-speaking people. But why does language become a reason for conflict, as the prime purpose of language is to communicate—a very practical question to be raised.

Since the advent of civilisation, there has been a tendency for social categorisation. Language proved to be a major tool for such standardisation. The ones who spoke the same language became an ethnic group. Language thus linked families and became a storehouse of ethnicity (Obeng and Adegbija 354). Tamil too became such a binding force, imparting an ethnic identity. This identity becomes a bane for the Sri Lankan Tamils' existence as they were killed and destroyed in the namesake of their identity. The Sinhalese were on the move towards an ethnic cleansing, which infuriated the Tamils, especially the Tamil Youth. These infuriated minds gave rise to the dream of an independent Tamil state called the Tamil *Eelam* in their homeland. The Tamil Tigers, the main opponents of the Sri Lankan army, thus adopted a dual identity: being a Tamil and being a Tiger.

The title of this book, *Tamil Tigress*, reflects this dual identity. The initial identity being that of a Tamil empowers and motivates Soyza to receive her further identity as a Tigress.

Being a Sri Lankan Tamil urges her to become a Tigress for the independence of the Tamil *Eelam*. These dual identities bring out a brilliant interplay of past and present memories to form replaced memories. Replaced memory adorns multiple dimensions. One dimension of replaced memory we see in this particular work is that of devotion and responsibility towards her motherland that pushes Soyza to take up her identity as a Tigress. Another dimension of replaced memory is observed when she understands the harsh reality, and this reality contradicts her initial ideological fervour which again creates a series of replaced memories. The occurrence of replaced memories is seen several times throughout the initial chapters. "I was being haunted by these disturbing images. It brought back memories of the men and women at the Hatton railway station I had witnessed as a child some twelve years ago" (Soyza 60).

Individual memory intersects with present experiences to form a transformed memory, which can be rightly called replaced memory. This process is significant because it suggests that certain memories lie dormant in the human mind, only to surface during traumatic events. This is an effective illustration of how replaced memory operates. The initial dimension of replaced memory is created by the spirit of nationalism. This triggers a series of changes in Soyza. Feelings of anger and frustration build up in her teenage mind, fuelling her nationalism and love for her homeland. At the age of seventeen, driven by a desire to make her homeland safe, she leaves home to join the Tigers and adopt the identity of a Tigress. The identity adopted by Soyza was intentional, favoured by unintentional circumstances. Even though the account of her experiences adorning this identity is portrayed effectively, it is significant not to centralise these experiences. Our focus is on replaced memory and how it affects the identity in Tamil Tigress.

When dealing with memory and identity, especially in the backdrop of a conflict, it is imperative to compare the experiences. Meena Kandasamy, in her work *The Orders Were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle*, documents the experiences of another tigress whose initial identity was being a Tamil, which led her to become a child soldier. But the identity of being a tigress is being replaced by that of a rape victim on the battlefield. Soyza did not surrender; rather, she quit being a Tigress. But Kandasamy outlines the memory of another tigress, who, after surrendering to the Sri Lankan army, had to endure endless rapes.

> The rapists. Everyone from a top army official to the low-level soldiers wanted a piece of my flesh. No, the rapes do not wait. It does not begin after the war. There is no patience. My people were braving bombs, and here I was being raped (Kandasamy 50)

The experience of the other tigress points out the fact that even if a single dimension of the replaced memory was common between Soyza and her, the other dimension, the creation of the dual identity, does not share any resemblance. This shows the unpredictability and fragile nature of memory and identity on the battlefield. This also becomes a poignant reminder of the differences in the creation of multiple dimensions of replaced memory and identity in similar circumstances by different individuals.

The narrative focuses on the individual memories that she endures in guerrilla camps. Here, she forms new memories, often intertwined with trauma and conflict. These experiences as a child soldier in a brutal war shape her secondary identity. It is crucial to understand that personal identity is not solely constructed through individual consciousness; interactions with others can also contribute. Memory plays a significant role in identity construction. Soyza's

experiences in the camps, battlefields, and jungles of Vanni create a new set of memories, which aids in the process of reconstruction of identity.

Tamil Tigress recounts Niromi de Soyza's personal journey as a young soldier with the Tamil Tigers, offering both individual and collective perspectives on the trauma experienced. By placing her memories within their socio-political backdrop, Niromi presents a comprehensive narrative of shared memories and trauma. The non-linear structure reflects the fragmented nature of traumatic recollections, often appearing as sudden flashbacks.

> Holding her AK in position, Ajanthi got off the ground and on to her knees. Briefly, she turned around to look at me, just like she had at school, where I had sat behind her in the third row. Whenever she turned around to talk to me, a chalk duster would come flying at her (Soyza 5)

Flashbacks and traumatic recollections create a replaced memory for Soyza. Identities are bound by memory. Even though this aspect has been the subject of critical interrogation, the autobiographical narratives, memoirs, and journals prove that memories play a significant role in the shaping of character and identity.

Joining a conflict such as war often necessitates a profound reconsideration of a person's individuality. This is vividly captured in the narrative transformation that Soyza undergoes. In the unique context of the Tamil Tigers, combatants were required to assume new identities through the adoption of battle names, a practice that serves both strategic and psychological purposes. For instance, Niromi, adopting the name 'Shenuka', symbolises a break from her past identity and the adoption of a new persona tailored to the exigencies of warfare. Shenuka thus becomes a symbol of her identity as a Tigress. But, even after being a combatant in the LTTE and urging one of her fellow tigers to call her Shenuka, she chooses to use 'Niromi' throughout the narrative.

The alteration of one's name in scenarios such as a war or any kind of conflict is not merely a tactical manoeuvre but also a deep psychological shift that can significantly influence one's behaviour and self-perception. Judith Butler's concept of performativity suggests that identity is constituted through repeated actions and expressions, which in this case are encapsulated in the new name ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 1988). Therefore, the adoption of a battle name can be seen as a performative act that reshapes one's identity according to the demands of the militant environment.

Additionally, Erik Erikson's theory of identity crisis and reformation highlights how extreme situations, such as participation in armed conflicts, can lead to an identity crisis, which may be resolved through the adoption of a new identity that provides a sense of community and purpose (Erikson, 1968). By adopting a new name, members of the Tamil Tigers like Shenuka are not only concealing their previous identities but are also actively engaging in the reconstruction of their selves, aligned with the collective identity of their group.

Traumatic memories are often recalled in a disjointed and fragmented manner. This fragmented recollection of traumatic experiences significantly influences her evolving identity over time. Following successive losses of loved ones and exposure to internal injustices within the group, Soyza becomes progressively disillusioned with both the state of the country and the LTTE. She is confronted with the sobering realisation that romanticised notions of fighting for a noble cause are eclipsed by brutal wartime truths. This also serves as an example where constructed memories based on idealism and glorification of war become a point of vulnerability. Soyza grapples with internal conflict as her initial ideological fervour

clashes sharply with the grim realities of war. Another dimension of the internal conflict is captured by Anuk Arudpragasam through his novel The Story of a Brief Marriage.

The Story of a Brief Marriage by Anuk Arudpragasam is a deeply moving narrative that primarily revolves around the life of its protagonist, Dinesh, over a single day and night. Despite the seemingly short time frame in which the storyline unfolds, it manages to convey a heartfelt and profoundly touching account of memory, trauma, and the struggle of an identity crisis. The novel opens with gruesome pictures of disabled bodies, hands found in the mud, and legs of children amputated due to shrapnel from the shell attacks.

> Shrapnel had dissolved his hand and forearm into a soft, formless mass, spilling to the ground from some parts, congealing in others, and charred everywhere else. Three of the fingers had been fully detached, where they were now it was impossible to tell, and the two remaining still, the index and thumb, were dangling from the hand by very slender threads. (5)

The images, thus presented in a normalised manner, reflect the harsh reality of war shelters and camps. The author vividly portrays Dinesh's struggle to comprehend "the reality of all the truncated limbs" (6). Amidst chaos and destruction, Dinesh is unexpectedly approached with a marriage proposal by Mr. Somasundaram, for his daughter Ganga, whom Dinesh had only met a few times. Dinesh faces a difficult decision, as he is asked to make a lifelong commitment in a situation where the concept of time is uncertain. The entire novel skilfully intertwines the past and the present, resulting in the creation of a modified memory induced by the war, referred to as the replaced memory.

The novel presents various instances of the occurrence of replaced memory. The lives of Sri Lankan Tamils, the Tamil-speaking minority in Sri Lanka, were profoundly disrupted by

a three-decade-long civil war. Prior to the conflict, the idea of being a victim or losing cherished memories was unimaginable. However, as the 20th century came to a close, the reality of war cast a terrifying shadow over the Tamil population. Their daily lives became marked by death, injuries, displacement, shelling, bombings, and violence. Once bustling schools became abandoned, makeshift clinics emerged, and war-induced transformations replaced once cherished memories. The camp, once a joyful place filled with inquisitive children, has been transformed by the war into a site of horror, grief, and despair, creating a replaced memory. This replaced memory becomes an act of survival as it serves as a reminder of the past and the future. In various instances, Dinesh consciously endeavours to replace old memories with new ones. "He would much rather just wait till the blood had drained and the flesh had hardened, when picking the severed arm up would be more like picking up a stick or small branch, perhaps not much more, but more so all the same" (8).

He also reasons for the need for replaced memories. During his time with Ganga, he reminisces about his childhood. Dinesh meditates on his situation and understands that the recollections of the past did come to him only in brief traces. Those images of childhood that he had treasured for so long were gone. Those memories only left behind vacant spaces, like revisiting one's long abandoned home to find that all its contents had been emptied. The inability of Dinesh to find the origin of the clothes that had been clinging to him for so long and one of the few things that he had of the past exemplifies the argument. Shehan Karunatilaka, in his award-winning novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, points out that we forget what we want to remember and remember what we want to forget (Karunatilaka, 2022). The brief traces of memory that exist within him gets filled with scarred memories of displacement and loss. These scarred memories later get transformed into replaced memories.

Dinesh recounts how the war has reduced all the buildings (schools, homes, etc.) to the same state. He criticises the tendency to historicise objects as war memorials. In this dimension, Dinesh's demand for a replaced memory is farsighted. He understands the fragility of the past and the hope that the future extends devoid of painful memories and remnants of the past. This creation of a replaced memory would aim at reshaping the national memory. This is Dinesh's personal attack on the process of memorialisation. Ahilan Kadirgamar, in his article on the post-war impasse in Sri Lanka, points out the attacks on memorialisation of the war dead, which reflects a grim reality (Kadirgamar 7).

> What point could there be, except for childish curiosity, in trying to learn the identity of these destroyed structures? What point was there when the best thing would have been to clear away all the rubble, to raze whatever was left, and build in its place whatever was necessary for the future, completely new? (7).

The novel is filled with varied images of people crying over dead bodies, weeping over their loved ones detached body parts, lying awaiting death, and evacuating frequently to prolong their lives as much as possible. Loneliness is yet another theme put forward in the novel. There are instances where Dinesh pays attention to bodily memory, the shape of his hands and feet, the texture of his hair, and so on, on his hypothetical conclusions on death and the meaning of life. Having lost his family, Dinesh expresses his concern over what a human being feels.

This also becomes the reason for Dinesh to take Ganga's hand in marriage.

> He'd been isolated from his home, family, friends, and possessions so long that such a separation could no longer feel painful or even unusual. It was more than just disconnection from once familiar people and things that he felt,

> more than just a sense of being isolated; above all, it was the disintegration of his body that came to mind at such times, the disintegration of his hair, his teeth, his skin (18).

The disconnection and disintegration trigger his bodily memory, which gives rise to a reconstructed memory. It brings to mind his former self, distinguishing between the two different states of his being. This bodily memory also sparks physical desires. Despite being without food for several days, he feels the need to eliminate bodily waste. Arudpragasam's writing is intimate, positioning Dinesh in close familiarity with himself and his environment. Every image and action is given meticulous attention. A prime example is Dinesh's urge to rid his body of waste. The thorough detailing of this routine process elevates it beyond the ordinary, extending over two pages. This careful attention underscores the significance of every moment in a war-torn country. The care with which he disposes of his bodily waste points out his yearning for the reconstruction of his identity. It was vital that he digs a good hole to bury his shit, he felt, for the offering he was making to the earth would be void if not properly presented. "It was not rich and heavy and rounded, but he had made it himself with his thin, weak body, and the earth, he knew, would be grateful" (23).

In his loneliness, he discovers scattered things, which once belonged to separate shelves and rooms but now lay orphaned in the road: a woman sitting by herself and eating sand compulsively from the ground, whose mouth had once gotten a regular dose of savoury Sri Lankan dishes. All these images of displacement can be traced to the formation of a replaced memory. This replaced memory becomes the identity of those people who suffer from the pangs of war and decaying conditions of the camp and also shapes the protagonist's identity.

Memories are replaced with newer ones wrapped in the smell of death, blood, and displacement. In camp sites, it becomes difficult to bury the bodies; hence, the only thing

people can do to store the memory of their loved ones is through a touch, a smell, or a sight. These sensory memories act as catalysts in shaping replaced memories. He also tries to take in the smell of familiar things due to the unpredictable nature of the war. He smelt the dry, moist sand in his hands after taking a dip near the ocean, as he would probably never smell that again. He takes a long time for emptying his bowel, to memorise the feeling one last time, to commit to memory.

Replaced memory is a brilliant interplay of past and present, an intersection of individual and collective memory, of haptic and iconic memory. Eating food becomes a replaced memory for him, wherein haptic memory or the memory of touch gets activated. An individual retains the memory of touch after the stimulus has been removed. Haptic memory plays an important role in the production of replaced memory. When trauma is placed within the context of memory or replaced memory, it triggers a complex interplay of the past and the present.

When Dinesh touches the food, the sense of touch creates a brief memory of the physical sensations such as texture, temperature, and pressure, which lasts for a few seconds. These memories of touch, especially those related to a traumatic event, can be triggered, leading to flashbacks.

All the above-mentioned activities also have an element of iconic memory. Iconic memory is the visual counterpart of haptic memory. The detail retained in iconic memory can lead to flashbacks.

> A few days later, Dinesh saw Ganga working in the clinic for the first time, her face smooth as a soft stone, expressionless, and despite her gauntness, somehow gentle. It wasn't that she had forgotten or gotten over the deaths, for

> there were still little aftershocks in which she stopped whatever she was doing and for a moment seemed to tremble, almost flutter (26).

Excretion becomes a replaced memory for him when he sees his waste produced, which sets him in a trail of emotions. Bathing becomes an important replaced iconic memory for him.

> Taking the scissors in his right hand and plucking out a lengthy tuft of hair from the top of his head with his left, he hesitated for a moment, as if he were about to do something of significance, then snipped it off. When all his fingernails and toenails had been cut, he gathered them up from the newspaper into the palm of his hand, brought them to his nose, and breathed in their intimate and slightly nauseating scent. They contained in them the accumulation of all the different places he had walked and all the different things he had held in the last couple of months, and unlike his scentless hair, they gave off a vivid account of his recent past. Dinesh breathed them in several times deeply, to take in all they contained and to memorize their scent (81).

This paragraph helps us in understanding the fact that memories are not stable; they fluctuate and are continually reconstructed and modified with new sensory inputs, which is olfactory in this scenario. This instance is also a powerful example of how replaced memories are not just concerned with remembering and forgetting; rather, it is also about the sensory re-experiencing and re-interpreting of past events.

The study of Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress* reveals the significant role that memory plays in times of conflict. *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, written by someone who wasn't part of the war but became a part of the gruelling realities of the aftermath of war, paints out a heartfelt picture of a man named

Dinesh, whose experiences over a day and night become the focal point of the novel. *Tamil Tigress* becomes a significant work in the field of memory studies as it itself is a work of memory. Through the narrative, Niromi de Soyza draws upon various aspects of the war and the disillusionment she underwent, which compelled her to leave her identity as a Tigress. Yet the identity never leaves her. In one of her powerful and revealing interviews, Niromi de Soyza courageously shared her primary reason for deciding to publish her book, *Tamil Tigress*. This decision was made despite the looming security threats that were apparent. She was driven by a desire to dispel the persistent misconceptions that surrounded Sri Lankan Tamil migrants. In her pursuit of truth, she used her personal memories as a powerful form of activism, a tool for raising awareness, and most importantly, a form of resistance against misinformation ("Niromi de Soyza discusses Tamil Tigress").

Soyza's personal memories are embedded in this work of autobiographical memory, through which her identity is intricately constructed. As a child soldier in the midst of a civil war that spanned three tumultuous decades, her experiences and recollections have undoubtedly shaped her identity. Her memories have not only created an indelible mark on her psyche but also provided a lens through which she, and subsequently her readers, can examine and understand the past.

The power of memory also plays an essential role, serving as a critical tool for survival amidst the chaos and struggles. In the compelling narrative of *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, there's a recurring theme of replaced memory embedded throughout the storyline. These replaced memories, whether painful or joyful, significantly contribute to the formation of identity for the protagonist, Dinesh.

Replaced memory is aided by haptic, iconic, and olfactory memories. These memories also play a major role in exposing the interplay between the past and the present, thus

resulting in the production of replaced memory. The study of such sensory interactions with memory offers insights into the nuanced ways in which our past is continuously woven into our present identity and perception. Memory becomes a great tool for resistance as it challenges the dominant narratives imposed by the victorious parties in conflict.

In *Tamil Tigress*, we see a more nuanced memory of the civil war, that too from the point of view of one of the first female soldiers of the LTTE. This resistance through memory highlights the power dynamics involved in whose memories are recorded and recognised as the historical narrative. Soyza gives a very honest account of her experiences with the Tigers, thus demystifying the misconceptions wrapped around this conflict.

The Story of a Brief Marriage is a brilliantly written, heartfelt fictional account of Dinesh. The story is narrated through his memories of the past and the present intertwined with the sensory memories to reveal the production of replaced memory. There are various scenes that focus on Dinesh's intimate rituals, which include him using his olfactory, haptic, and iconic senses to connect with past experiences. These senses trigger the act of remembering, and at the same time, they also remind him to "unremember" the past. These senses play a major role in the development of replaced memory.

Replaced memory, in this context, evolves into a powerful vehicle for the formation of personal identity. Dinesh, the subject of this narrative, works diligently to assert his individuality through a series of intimate rituals and practices, crafted and performed with great care. However, in the process, he experiences a profound disconnection from his past, a sensation that leaves him feeling not only isolated from the world around him but also alienated from his own physical being. Throughout the narrative, the author presents us with a detailed account of how replaced memory, once just a passive receptacle of past

experiences, can be mobilised as a potent tool for resistance, survival, and the reassertion of identity.

Through this exploration of Dinesh's journey, we come to understand the complex relationship between memory and identity and how the two are intricately intertwined. In the face of adversity, Dinesh's reliance on his reconstructed memories becomes both a refuge and a form of resistance, providing him with the strength to survive and the will to continue asserting his unique identity.

Within the framework of replaced memory, both works under study, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *Tamil Tigress*, acquire heightened significance. *The Story of a Brief Marriage* is particularly noteworthy as it delivers a poignant exploration of immediate memories set against the harsh backdrop of a brutal war. The protagonist, Dinesh, finds himself in the midst of a ceaseless cycle of replaced memories. His experiences are akin to a revolving door of memories, each one supplanting the last, only to be replaced in turn. This constant flux of memories, which is a direct result of his circumstances, is not merely a passive process. Rather, these memories play an instrumental role in shaping his identity, actively moulding his sense of self as they are replaced one after the other. Therefore, it is clear that replaced memory is not just a mechanism of the mind but a potent force that can shape the very essence of an individual's identity.

Tamil Tigress gives a first-hand account of the author’s experiences of being a tigress of the LTTE. Her ideologies replace her personal histories with a collective narrative that serves the needs of the LTTE. The narrative also exposes how personal or individual memories are replaced by constructed narratives, crucial for sustaining the moral and emotional vigour needed for the conflict. Over time, these replaced memories become a source of internal

conflict as her initial ideology gets hit by the harsh realities of the war, which leads to an identity crisis.

Both these texts prove that memory is an active and dynamic process that is not only a repository of the past but fuels the construction of the present and the future. Replaced memory gives us an understanding of memory's malleability, as it can be both an adaptive tool and vulnerability. Understanding replaced memory in these narratives not only contributes to literary and cultural studies but also offers practical insights into the human condition in extreme contexts.

The question that remains at the end of memory studies in the Sri Lankan context and especially in the context of replaced memory is: What is Sri Lanka's replaced memory after the brutal three-decade-long war? And what is Sri Lanka's identity as the result of the war? The country hasn't yet recovered from the after effects of the brutal civil war. Sri Lanka is in a standstill, a deadlock, as the nation still grapples with stunted growth in their economy, back-to-back economic crises, especially the 2022 crisis, due to the Rajapaksha regime and their nationalistic ideals, and a polarised political scenario. The identity of Sri Lanka has now been transformed as an ethnically divided nation that has been hit with a stifling *impasse*. Misery and disappointment have replaced the lives of the Tamils, as they meet with a strange paradox of finding them at the lowest ebb of the society even with a determined leadership and efforts and wide support. This *impasse* has now become their replaced memory. According to Ahilan Kadirgamar, the Tamil community's future hinges on creating a fresh vision that encompasses the whole nation, grounded in principles of equality and liberty (7).

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'Luca': A metaphorically charged queer experience.

Athulya S Menon

Queer theory in film explores narratives that veer away from the traditional heteronormative perspectives. Queer theory's origins are complex, melding aspects from feminism, oppositional film making, post-structuralism and radical movie making. Queer theory in film is both an academic approach and a form of political action, challenging the dominant norms of heterosexuality within film making. One key concept in queer film theory is the idea of queering the gaze, which involves challenging the stereotypical and traditional notions as well as the overpowering heterosexual viewpoints in cinema. This can include subverting the gender norms, exploring non-binary identities, portraying relationships outside the mainstream. This article is an attempt to dissect the metaphorically charged and queer coded possibilities of the 2021 Pixar animated movie, 'LUCA' and how the film's central relationship between the two young protagonists, Luca and Alberto, has taken on an even deeper significance - one that speaks to the evolving landscape of queer representation in animation. Not only is this an attempt to spark intriguing discourse surrounding the potential of animation as a queer medium, embracing ambiguity and fluidness but is also aimed at understanding queering a medium, especially when its possibility is explicitly denied, highlighting the tarnished morals behind queer baiting.

Scholars involved in the growing field of queer theory are continuously seeking for various mediums that can channel ways of existing and evolving whilst simultaneously challenging the shackles of normative culture. At the heart of this search, is the idea of "bending, breaking, and questioning"—a conceptual trichotomy which illustrates different ways to destroy the fixed categorizations that contribute to the problematic binarisms existing in dominant hegemony. According to Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure,* to bend is to refuse the rigidity of normative structures, to break is to shatter the illusion of stability and coherence and to question is to engage in a continuous process of interrogation (Halberstam, 2011). Through its imaginative space and visual language, animation opens its arms to diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives that can hardly be done within live-action cinema. Furthermore, the kind of triadic thinking mentioned above provides moral ground for the exploration of the dynamic play of queerness within this visual sphere, especially in relation to animation as a medium that can bend, break, and question societal restrictions and boundaries, becoming an important tool and medium for queer representation

Its unique space for fluidity, transformation and disruption of stable forms is at the core of animation's queer potential and possibilities. Unlike live-action cinema with seamless, high-gloss aesthetics, which are often forced to primarily limit itself within well defined boundaries and rigid bodies, animated figures with their jerky movements, visible brush strokes and intentional visual disruptions are created within a space of unrestricted creativity which widens boundaries and gives way for unconventional storytelling techniques and visual representations, focusing on the suspension of rigid realism, reflecting the fluidity and complexity of queerness. As seen by Halberstam: "The animated body, with its capacity for radical metamorphosis offers a powerful counter to the rigid gender binaries and heteronormative scripts that often constrain embodied experience" (Halberstam, 2018).

Thus, fluid forms found within animation become a powerful tool to obliterate stereotypes and give relevance to marginalized and sidelined voices. The fact that animated characters can be androgynous, oddly shaped, differently coloured and structured offers a realm where narratives can exist beyond the constraints of reality, inviting us, the viewers, to examine and interact with the medium's materiality and performative dimensions of intersectional subjectivities that challenge narrow definitions often found in heteronormativity and cisgenderism.

Scholars are often seen grappling queer theory and the politics of representation. The medium of animation plays a crucial role in making sense of the above complexity. Though, as a concluding analysis, it is interesting to note that animation's place in the world of media has always been lobbied and pigeonholed as merely children's entertainment. This mistaken perception has allowed the general public to regard animation as something frivolous and inconsequential. This winding wrong judgment however, sheds off the political and ideological meaning often meticulously imbued in several animations. But how can one use animation to convey nuanced and thought provoking ideas?

One of the many ways in which animation plays its light-heartedness and materiality to its favor, is by creating metaphorical and allegorical stories in which fantastical worlds and characters are often used to weave critical commentary and social critique, allowing nuanced ideas and themes to be carefully interwoven into the work without losing out on the enjoyment of the story. It is as Ruberg puts it, is not about the assertion of a stable identity but rather the willingness to bend, break, and question the very categories that would seek to contain and constrain it. By placing queer themes around fantastic worlds, magical quests, adventure, and even heartwarming stories, animation can light up discourse concerning identity and its acceptance while igniting a sense of belonging and inclusivity among viewers at large, paving way for what was once unthinkable, to become the new normal.

To the casual, oblivious, heterosexual eye, ‘LUCA' is a coming-of-age, animated movie revolving around a young sea monster named Luca, who's half human while dry, but turns into a rather odd looking merman, if wet. He ventures out to the surface of the ocean one day, befriending a fellow sea monster, Alberto, whom he later develops a close relationship with. Alberto helps the timid, shy and afraid Luca to break out of his shell and live life on his own terms. Together, they attempt to explore a seaside town brimming with human-beings, a species they are conditioned to avoid at all costs, all the while desperately trying to hide their true identities as hybrid sea monsters. Trying to grapple hiding who you truly are, in a space new to you, suppressing your feelings, later realizing to let them free and wholly embracing your identity no matter how ambiguous or out of the ordinary it may seem to others, ‘LUCA’ encapsulates the common experiences of what it's like to be “different” through a compelling story driven by eye-catching animations and a well written plot.

Taking into account certain subtextual cues, ‘LUCA’ is a frankly unsolicited mirror into the embarrassing crushes of semi-ambiguously gay childhood. This movie has every appendage flapping wildly outside the closest door while one coat keeps it technically “inside”, but ‘LUCA’ is made up of little pieces, a bunch of cultural material you can deconstruct, pick up and rearrange. Each piece of ‘LUCA’ has a history, each piece has a community that can recognise the cultural signals imbued with its meeting. What queer pieces make up ‘LUCA'? aesthetics? allegories? lived experience? Well, ‘LUCA’ managed to pack a decent amount of queer experience into one movie, maybe not all of the complicated, delicate and intricate aspects of it but definitely a large chunk is beautifully brought out in the movie, which is not surprising since ‘LUCA’ is predominantly a story about monsters, something the western horror tradition has always queer-coded.

As many film historians like Harry Benshoff (‘Monsters in the closet’) have noted, monsters

have always been an allegorical representation of queer, even the horror genre is queer. For scholars like Robin Wood, "queerness can be any narrative moment, performance, or stance which negates the oppressive binarisms of the dominant hegemony*"* ('Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan'). At the core of horror films, especially monster movies, is the battle between normality (heterosexual agenda) and the other (queerness). As the horror genre developed over the course of centuries, queerness and otherness became inexorably linked. Since the nineteenth century, writers have written queer-coded monsters whose struggles mirror the realities of queer phobia. Several writers over the years have even made monsters explicitly queer, like the lesbian vampire in the 1872 work 'Carmilla'. Needless to say, plenty of nineteenth century gothic authors like William Beckford, Matthew Lewis and Francis Lathom were themselves queer, sneaking gay subtexts and ques into their works since they couldn't write about queerness in any other way or medium.

The same thing applies with film, especially since the motion picture production code banned positive portrayal of queerness on screen until the 1960s, people found alternative ways to portray queerness. Most audiences identified with the straight main characters while a number of queer people saw themselves in the "otherness" of monsters. Tapping into the experience of someone whose identity is seen as irreconcilable in the mainstream world deeply resonated with the average queer experience. The association of homosexuality and "villainy" or "otherness" most definitely comes from homophobic constructions, one would be deemed silly to celebrate, which is why 'LUCA' is important. 'LUCA' is very much in conversation with this long history of gay monsters and outsiders. It packs multiple shades of queer life into one unambiguously queer puzzle.

The story starts off with Luca, a curious sea monster living with his sea monster family who is

extra cautious of him going up to the human world. Shortly after the exposition, Luca runs into another sea monster kid like himself 'Alberto' who takes Luca up to the surface, but since Luca is programmed to view the human world as scary and evil, he is hesitant in accompanying Alberto at first, but he decides to not dwell on concerns and finds himself absolutely in awe of the world above the ocean. "It's bad, I'm not supposed to be up here" (00:10:45) hiding your likes, with it a major part of your identity in fear of destroying societal expectations and outwardly doing "wrong" is highlighted by Luca's constant hesitation and his blatant refusal to accept his love for the human world as seen in the aforementioned dialogue. Despite what Luca's parents have to say, Luca and Alberto begin to bond over their mutual interest in the human stuff like the 'Vespa' - a scooter that represents freedom. "Vespa is freedom."(00:15:17) is what Luca reads aloud from a poster, daydreaming about him riding one over the horizon. Within the first quarter, the movie is covering multiple common aspects of the queer experience, be it the homophobic parents, internalized homophobia and your first same-sex crush that makes you re-examine your entire identity, forcing you to go on a journey of self discovery.

Alberto helps Luca discover a side of himself he didn't know he had, he's helping him overcome internalized self hatred in a way - an important aspect that comes with the realization. There is this one concept that Alberto comes up with, called "Bruno" - an idea that any hesitation or doubt you feel is an annoying person named Bruno, making you chicken out. For Luca, this is liberating. All his life, he has been taught to stay in line, follow the rules and fear humanity without question. But Alberto makes Luca understand that rules do not need to define who he is, he can do that, himself. When Luca's parents find out about his secret rendezvous with Alberto, they plan to send Luca away with his uncle. The conversation which later unfolds between Luca and his mother is so by-the-book that many queer people will easily recognise

and associate this with their own coming out experiences. “I know you and I know what's best for you” (00:25:39) says Luca’s mom, when he states his love for the human world and Alberto. This deeply moving and enticing conversation between them in its entirety is an allegorical representation of how queer people often face rejection from family members who fail to understand their identity and label their lack of understanding as “*protection against the dangerous”*. Inner battles that stem from the painful realization of being misunderstood and the subsequent lack of community that arises from it, are meticulously portrayed in ‘LUCA’ vis-a-vis the fallout he has with his family which causes him to run away from home with Alberto. Once Luca and Alberto reach the human town, they find their dream vehicle Vespa parked in a nearby alley. But the Ercole, the lead antagonist rudely almost outs them as sea monsters but they are miraculously saved by Julia, another character with queer coded subtleties. But why does Julia save them? “We underdogs have to look out for each other, right?” (00:33:06) says Julia, alluding to another aspect of queer theory: chosen family.

Throughout history, queer people have been excluded or disowned from their direct families or communities of origin. As a result, there is a huge history of queer people creating their own support systems through their chosen family. In Luca’s situation he faces being sent away from what he loves, similar to how many queer youth are forced to go to conversion therapy or pray-the-gay-away camps and like many other queer youth who try to escape these threatening situations, Luca also ended up in search of a new home.

Another metaphorically charged moment in the film is when Luca says his family is sending him away from “everything he loves''. This love aspect is important as LGBTQ+ rights issues have often been advocated for within a love framework (love is love), the fact that Luca equates the human world with love, not just as something he likes or something he finds cool but as love makes the metaphorically connection even clearer as he is ostracized for loving what he

loves, and he is asking Julia for her help via helping them win the triathlon race. Julia also sees herself as an outsider and is empathetic towards Luca and Alberto's pain. "Every summer I come here and everyone thinks I'm just some weird kid who doesn't belon*g*" (00:53:12). That feeling of being an outsider and growing up as a queer person overlap.

As the movie progresses we see Alberto growing jealous of the friendship between Luca and Julia, his jealousy then slowly morphing into wanting a sense of control. But Alberto's desire for control isn't just about Luca, it's about himself. His lingering, internalized homophobia teams up with his jealousy and so he wants to control Luca because his relationship with Luca is primarily the only positive thing in his life which causes him to project his feelings of internalized self hatred after losing control of the situation onto Luca. The movie then cuts to both Luca and Alberto getting beat up by Ercole over their secret. Why the eerie recreation of homophobic violence that queer people face so frequently? There were many ways to convey that Ercole is the villain in the story. But this horrifically recognisable way of portraying the antagonist of the movie can be understood as an intentional signal of the underlying queer subtleties so boldly present in the film. Alberto fears abandonment, so he tries to retain control over whatever situation he can but he can't control who is and he can't control how the outside world sees him, his queerness or sea monsterness adds. a layer of difficulty that's hard for a child to process.

In this turmoil, Luca and Alberto have a heart-to-heart, after which Luca enters the triathlon race alone, almost on the verge of showing his true sea monster self because of the heavy rain. Not upsetting the apple cart of rom-com conventionality, Luca is saved by Alberto carrying an umbrella, preventing the both of them from being outed. On his way over to Luca, Alberto trips and falls on the wet ground, revealing his purple scales and with it, his sea monster identity. The bystanders are shocked and Luca finds himself contemplating continuing to hide his

identity in order to secure his chance at being a so-called normal kid. But in the end, he decides to follow his better judgment and risks everything to save Alberto, cycling into the rain, his human skin slowly turning into emerald green scales and fins. They finish the race together only to find the whole town waiting for them with pitchforks, “We're afraid of you, everyone is horrified and disgusted by you because you are monsters” says Ercole (01:17:19). Fortunately, Luca and Alberto have their allies, another significant aspect of queer experience. Julia sticks with them even if it means checking her sea monster bias. And in this critical moment, when the whole town seems to have turned on them, a new ally appears, Julia's dad. “I know who they are, they are Luca and Alberto, and they are the winners” (01:17:37), the dad proclaims Luca and Alberto despite their different identities, are still people, sea people but still, people. With these crucial allies Luca and Alberto gained the town's acceptance. Acceptance here being the key word. Finding people who accept you for who you are and accepting yourself as well is crucial to the existence of a queer identity.

Luca's journey of self discovery and acceptance of his unique identity mirrors the coming-out experience of many LGBTQ+ individuals. It beautifully weaves in queer subtexts, offering a nuanced and relatable portrayal of self acceptance and finding one's place in the world. Enrico Casarosa was hesitant in admitting the film's queer subtexts. Disney has a long history of making their gay characters editable out of any story they appear in, in fear of losing socially conservative audiences and non western markets. Whatever ‘LUCA’ is, it took pieces imbued with queer meaning to produce a heartfelt and relatable story that celebrates the importance of embracing one' true identity and speaks to universal desire for acceptance and understanding, making it an exceptional movie especially when viewed through a queer lens. Ultimately, the strategic deployment of visual language in Luca is an example of the potential of queer rhetoric to transform animated cinema. By means of an aesthetic of liminality, fluidity, and marginality,

the film shapes a discursive space for the investigation of non-normative subjectivities and reframes hegemonic cultural schemes. This visual rhetoric combined with nuanced uses of dialogue and narrative structure makes ‘LUCA’ a very strong contribution to the evolving tradition of queer-inflected animated texts.

But what if ‘LUCA’ as the director Casarosa argues is simply “*i*ntended to depict the transformative power of friendship*”?* Where does queer baiting start and queer rhetoric begin? What exactly differentiates the two? According to Judith Fathallah's analysis of the BBC's Sherlock queer baiting can be seen as “a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility.″ (Fathallah, 2014).

This differs largely from the deliberate use of queer subtexts often found in queer coded narratives that contribute to the queer rhetoric. The intent being the key difference here. A character with a flamboyant personality and an avid interest in fashion can be queer coded. But if two characters have deep, moving, intense emotional moments and suggestive dialogues but their relationship refuses to progress beyond friendship, then it can be seen as a dangling possibility of queerness, used to bait queer viewers without upsetting the conservative audience. The transforming sea monsters in the movie can very much be queer coded, however the blatant denial of a queer rendition of the film, despite being so outwardly and by-the-book queer, is where the argument of queer baiting in ‘LUCA’ strengthens.

Especially since ‘LUCA' is an animated movie mainly catering to a younger demographic, the discourse becomes more “complicated” since conversations about queerness have historically been deemed as “inappropriate” for kids. The acceptance of queer rhetoric in the movie, which for some would be seen as “spreading the agenda” could have actually provided

a great opportunity to open pathways forging a sense of understanding in kids, about the existence of different identities which may differ from the dominant perceptions they are conditioned to relate with.

Queer kids and adults who saw the film alike, carried a narrative that doesn't just acknowledge but also explores how their kind of experience can be painful and alienating. Denying this sort of reading hurts not only viewers who already see themselves in its story, but it also shuts off the external community that might otherwise not engage with explicitly queer media, who would've benefited using 'LUCA's sensitive coming-out story as a learning experience. The queer reading of Luca ought to be as protected as Casarosa's own reading. Queer reading stands do not hurt the media, nothing is earned by crushing them. The whole discourse propelled by the movie, in conclusion serves as a reminder that queer rhetoric is a movement. It summons one to celebrate differences—all the while relentlessly pursuing a world where all voices might be equally heard and regarded. This transformative potential of queer rhetoric can be strategically highlighted by using animation as a queer medium, contributing to the ever evolving field of queer theory, with an unrelenting commitment to challenging the status quo and fostering empowerment among communities that have been marginalized, this movement refuses to be silenced as it scripts increasingly vivid narratives of a brighter future.

This is exactly why it is important to embrace the ambiguous, embrace the queer rhetoric and learn to work with it. As this rhetoric goes beyond only one identity. It also caters to revealing the intersectionality between several forms of oppression. Queer rhetoric, with its emphasis on aspects such as race, class, and disability intersect with queer experience, formulating an inclusive, holistic and expansive understanding of identities which have been historically excluded and undermined. In addition, the queer rhetoric is founded on fluidity and evolution. It is emulative of the dynamic nature that queerness itself embodies, constantly adapting and questioning. This openness to investigation and redefinition makes space for new perspectives to push forward, questioning identity and sexuality-related rigid ideas

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