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# Editorial

What are little boys made of?  
Snips and snails and puppy dogs' tails,  
That's what little boys are made of.  
What are little girls made of?  
Sugar and spice and all that's nice  
That's what little girls are made of.

It would be hard to find a better example of normative gender performativity than this infantile rhyme. It is precisely through such apparently innocuous texts that gender stereotypes are perpetuated and gender normative behaviour perpetuated from an early age. The current issue of *Colloquium* seeks to present articles which discuss how gender normativity is countered and transcended in literary texts and cultural practices.

Gender Studies have expanded the scope of Feminist Studies by bringing to the fore issues of identities which defy the binaries of male and female. The issues that are increasingly under scrutiny relate to psychology, economics, representations and the performance of gender as opposed to biological functions. The difference between biological sex and gender is something that has been argued since Simone Beauvoir proclaimed "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman". This statement is the starting point of Judith Butler's 1988 essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* in which one can see the kernel of her later work, *Gender Trouble*. The critique of gender roles considered normative in the western world, however, started even earlier with Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of

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Rousseau's condescending attitude towards women which reflects the naturalisation of the idea of women's subordination, which led to Beauvoir's ironic coinage "The Second Sex".

In India, where family bonds are still strong, strict codes of gender normative conduct are a powerful means of maintaining control and preserving entrenched structures of kinship, marriage and inheritance in a patriarchal society. It is quite another matter that the heterogenous culture of India actually has several pockets of practices which run counter to the patriarchal culture projected in the mainstream. Thus, the presence of matriarchal societies in certain parts of India is conveniently side-lined in all kinds of media representations. The distinction of gender roles mostly coincide with the divisions of public and private domains, and, economic and domestic division of labour. Ironically, even when modern women's versatility in balancing both the fronts are sometimes fêted by equating her with the ten-armed Devi Durga, no question is raised why there is no comparable male deity on whom the Indian men may model themselves. The acknowledgement of gender fluidity found in the story of Arjuna's disguise as Brihannala, or the idea of "*Radhabhadyutisubalitatanu*" associated with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, is largely suppressed in the dominant Indian mores of gender. Probably, this is partly inherited from the nationalist backlash against colonial feminising of India and Indians. Unfortunately, in their desire to counter such images, the nationalist intellectual elite may have ended up adopting westernised binaries of behaviour at the cost of other possibilities sometimes suggested in older Indian texts. Recent re-readings of these texts which have been encouraged by the rise of gender studies lenses, have yielded some interesting insights into the workings of sexual politics in privileging certain predominant attitudes linked to gender, sexuality and morality.

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The essays in this volume examine how literary texts challenged the constructions of gender in various societies at different historical periods.

In *'This house is mine': A Rewriting of the 'Doll's House' Legacy in Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde*, by Jashomati Ghose, the sound of a door banging shut is repeatedly invoked. This paper examines the evolution of women's self-identity from Ibsen to Emecheta. In her analysis Ghose shows how the ending of the latter's novel empowers the heroine to assert her rightful hold over her property; instead of exiling herself from a home that denies her the rights due to any human being, she reverses the gender stereotype of patrilineal and patrilocal society to the shock of her son, who is the one left banging the door in this novel. The diasporic context of the novel serves to challenge notion of patrilocality. By returning to her land of domicile in order to retrieve her agency over her own life, *Kehinde*, the eponymous heroine, subverts the constructs of both gender and race.

Soumyasree Banerjee's essay, *The Female Superhero: Politics of Sexuality and the Attempts to Transcend the Boundaries of Gender*, provides insights into how the idea of sex versus gender is reflected in the subversive gendering of female superheroes. The detailed discussion of the various phases of the Captain Marvel series traces the broadening scope of the series as it incorporates issues of race and religion within the broader concern with gender and identity. Banerjee skilfully portrays how the various seasons of the series have succeeded in keeping pace with developments in feminist discourse.

Barnana Hemaprava Sarkar distinguishes between 'transcending' and 'transgressing' by examining the interwoven webs of friendships in the novels of Toni Morrison and Elena Ferrante. Her article, *TRANSCENDING - A Choice or a Need? A study in Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Series' and Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'* addresses

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gender as well as racial transgressions/transcendence, by revealing how desire and ambition become intertwined in both the novels.

The possibilities of interpretations inherent in the rich tradition of Indian myths and classical literatures have provided material for three of the essays in this volume. The empowering of women's bodies as sights of power rather than as objects of male desire, and the subversion of expectations of modesty and shame have existed as sub-texts even within the patriarchal mode of classical Indian literature. The discipline of Gender Studies may have started in the west, but the prospect of transgressing expected norms of womanliness and manliness have been inherent in Indian myths and literatures for a long time. The figure of Surpanakha, whose humiliation and mutilation by the 'ideal' men of the Ramayana launched an epic war, is a recurrent subject which has been addressed in more than one article.

*The Woman as Other: Analysing Complex Gendered Narratives in Ramcharitmanas*, by Nidhi Shukla, discusses the role of Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas as a cultural text which is deployed in enjoining commonly accepted tropes of womanly virtues in India. Shukla traverses a broad sweep of history in connecting the continued survival of the values espoused by Tulsidas, to current discourses in Indian public life

*In Surpanakha- More Hated than Hateful: Exploring the Possible Nuances of Mytho-fiction in Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess*, Manisha Bhattacharya, examines Kavita Kané's modern retelling of the story of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister in the Mahabharata to pose questions regarding the representation of a catalytic female character in epic versions written by male poets. Can a woman author change our perception of Surpanakha? Was she the instigator of war, the cause of Lanka's annihilation, or was she a sacrifice at the altar of

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male aggression? The mutilation of her nose is a symbolic castration of a powerful woman whose “monstrous femininity” challenges the patriarchal conceptions of “submissive femininity”. Bhattacharya’s essay is an examination of the imbrication of mythical narratives with predominant societal norms.

Paromita Chakrabarti has explored the Mahabharata in *Shakuntala and Satyavati: Transcending Gender Roles*. She discusses the subversion of the gender roles traditionally assigned to women. In her discussions Chakrabarti reveals how Shakuntala and Satyavati, iconic female characters, overcome their positions as romanticised objects of lust and manage to use the norms of a patrilineal system to resist the subjugation of the womb. They achieve this by making their surrender to sexual lust conditional upon their right to mother sons who would become Kings.

*Feminising the Body and Institutionalising Gender through Smartphone Applications* by Aaheli Sen takes us from myths to the geography of the virtual world, where the ambiguity of human behaviour results from equal measures of narcissism and willing submission to governability. Combining geography and sociology, Sen takes a critical look at the governability implicit in women’s voluntary use of editing tools on smartphones to project self-images on social media sites. Sen employs a number of critical approaches to look at this modern behavioural phenomenon to comment on the nexus between commercial interests and normative conceptions of beauty and body images.

A discussion of the limitations of gender normativity was deemed to be crucial at a time when these are being questioned by various segments of society which shows an increasing disruption of socially acceptable behaviour. Colloquium, meant for the entire academic community, of which students are also a large part, seeks to highlight

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the emerging discourses surrounding gender and sexuality. By doing so, it is to be hoped that this generation of the youth will be more receptive to the diverse possibilities of self-actualisation.

The focus on students have also prompted the editorial board to include an article on an entirely different topic, but one that would be very helpful for students of literature. The last article in this volume, How Ben Jonson Rose from the Stage to the Page, By Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary, is relevant to the syllabus of English Literature, though it stands apart from the rest of the contributions.

**Suchandra Chakravarty**  
**Ananyya Banerjee**  
**Editors-in-Chief**  
**Colloquium**

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# ‘This house is mine’: A Rewriting of the ‘Doll’s House’ Legacy in Buchi Emecheta’s Kehinde

Jashomati Ghose

Ever since it was premiered at Copenhagen’s Royal Theatre on 21st December 1879, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has kept open the heated debate over the question of women’s rights, at once, legal, social, economic and existential; as understood in relation to their institutionalized identity as wives and mothers. The polarization of contemporary critical responses to this phenomenal play that, according to George Bernard Shaw, sent the sound of Nora’s slamming of the front door reverberating across the European stage, continued well beyond the nineteenth century along an uninterrupted flow of stage productions, literary rewritings and cinematic adaptations across Continents. While conservatives condemned, mocked or attempted to silence Nora’s rebellion against her institutionalized roles through sharp responses or radical rewritings of the play and Feminists found in Ibsen’s drama a bold celebration of their cause, another school of Ibsen critics deliberately downgraded the topical importance of the play by citing the playwright’s self-proclaimed status as a Humanist rather than a Feminist or reading *A Doll’s House* as a work of art against the grain of a propaganda play. While it is impossible to ignore this essentially polarized, either/or debate as an integral aspect of the ‘Doll’s House’ legacy inherited and appropriated by the Feminist literary tradition in the Continent and

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beyond, it is time indeed, to consider alternative literary endorsements of this legacy beyond the binaristic responses that it has continued to incite. In this context, the paper will attempt a reading of Nigeria born British author Buchi Emecheta's novel *Kehinde* as a critical reassessment of Ibsen's text in the context of Nigeria's female immigrants in Britain. *Kehinde*, as this paper will argue, problematises Nora's progressive pursuit of an identity that is incumbent upon a rejection of the bourgeois family, the family home and its fraught value system. It attempts to negotiate the quintessential 'Doll's House' debate by reworking the Ibsen paradigm into a postcolonial diasporic framework.

*Kehinde*, by tracing the eponymous protagonist's emergence from her conventional roles as the devoted wife and mother to her renewed self-appraisal as a Black immigrant woman aware of her fundamental rights and entitlements, evokes on the one hand, Ibsen's fundamental quest in *A Doll's house*. At the same time, it rewrites Ibsen by replacing Nora's journey away from the infantile dependence and comfort of her middle class home into the cold hostile world beyond its threshold, with Kehinde's return to her London home to establish her claims after a disappointing experience at her husband's natal home in Lagos. Nora's journey is problematised in the postcolonial Nigerian context through Kehinde's redefinition of her roles as a mother, wife as well as a daughter who turns her back rebelliously on the land of her birth to embrace a yet uncertain destiny shaped by her host country. Unlike in Ibsen's play, in Emecheta's novel it is the husband who fails to return, while the wife comes back to discover a new beginning, urged by the mysterious voice of a spirit-twin in her head. The text thereby, substitutes Nora's linear departure from home with the eponymous Kehinde's circuitous journeys, from the host country Britain to a postcolonial Nigeria and then back to Britain. It replaces Ibsen's



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spirited rebel with the mature immigrant who also turns out to be a revenant, with respect to the host country rather than the home country. Emecheta's *Kehinde*, a voice born out of the author's incisive literary inquiries into the sociological, mythical and existential parameters of womanhood in pre-colonial, colonial and diasporic African cultures; seems strategically to enact a transcendence of the engendered cultural codes already challenged in Ibsen. The thrust of *Kehinde*, as will be discussed in the following sections, unlike Ibsen's drama with which it undoubtedly invites comparison, is to fashion a female identity through a negotiation, rather than a challenging of culturally codified binaries which define women in a given socio-cultural context.

*Kehinde*, written in 1994, more than three decades since Emecheta's migration to England, is immensely relevant as a representative 'London novel' in the Black British novelistic tradition. As a product of the author's long stay in post imperial London, this later London novel<sup>1</sup> paves way for a dynamic authorial self-fashioning through confession, retrospection, unraveling and a radical interrogation of the intertwined discourses of nation, gender, class, race and sexuality in a diasporic context. More emphatically than in her previous London novels, Emecheta in *Kehinde* seems to be using the 'voices of women' to 'tell the world our part of the story', (449) as she claims in an interview conducted in the year the novel was published. Although it does not explicitly deal with the development of an authorial self in the manner of her first two novels, namely, *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* it is intimately connected with the quests of its predecessors, namely, the pursuit of identity and the yearning for a home in the heart of the mother country. Unlike in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where Nora's individuation must occur at the cost of jettisoning her home, in Emecheta's London novel, home remains one of the principal means through which the postcolonial

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female immigrant must assert her identity as a Black-British middle-class woman. The intricate grid of journeys and homecomings delineated in the novel is the literary outcome of a migrant self that has made its choice of embracing the host country after a long and arduous trial. In its ability to question and transcend engendered modes of being, the text succinctly ties together motifs explored in previous works, conveying the sense of a closure that can only be possible through a negotiation of binaries that the previous works evoke. Like the protagonist Gwendolen in her former novel *Gwendolen or The Family* for instance, Emecheta's Kehinde comes to define her identity through an acceptance rather than a rejection of England, her host country where she finally feels at home. Unlike the young Gwendolen who defines this identity through the agency of motherhood, however, Kehinde demythologizes the iconic importance of motherhood and seeks alternative avenues of self-fashioning made available to the modern Igbo woman living in post-imperial Britain. In this she is both like and unlike her predecessor Nnu ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who devotes her life unconditionally to the needs of her ungrateful children but refuses to bless women with the 'joys of motherhood' when after her death a shrine is erected in honour of her status as an exemplary Igbo mother. Kehinde integrates the rebellious voices of both Nnu Ego's vengeful spirit and Ibsen's Nora, her Nigerian and European predecessors, when in her final decision not to sell the house in London on the demands of either her absentee husband or her adolescent son, she refuses to play the model wife and mother in tune with her community's engendered norms. As she asserts her legal rights to the house, her social and intellectual rights to a well paid job and her existential rights as a 'human' towards the end of the novel, Kehinde neither echoes nor questions Nora's quest; rather, she completes it in the context of a particular milieu long familiar to the author, the

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world of Nigerian immigrants in Britain.

The opening chapter of *Kehinde* titled ‘The Letter’, introduces the reader to the tiny dining room of the Okolos who live in their ‘typical East London mid-terrace house with a small living room’(2). The Okolos’ deft economizing of domestic space for the purpose of bringing in ‘that extra pound or two’(2) by subletting a part of the house to temporary tenants, borders on an obsession with money that also dominates Nora’s world. The terrace-house with its stringently rationed space and the Helmer house, ‘tastefully but not expensively furnished’(1) may not echo one another. Although the Okolos’ legal claim to the house is no less secure than that of Torvald Helmer in Ibsen’s play, their awareness of being immigrants waiting to return to the home country makes their emotional claims to the London home appear less grounded than that of the former. With the near-claustrophobic compactness of Ibsen’s stage space, the audience is admitted into the nineteenth-century bastion of the White European middle-class male: the ‘doll’s house’. In Emecheta’s story about a Nigerian immigrant family in London however, the debilitating experience of race works in tandem with the legal provision for gender equality to problematise Albert Okolo’s patriarchal claim upon the house. In answer to Kehinde’s flattering remark about his ownership of a house in London therefore, Albert quickly says “We own a house”(4). Cutting across this patronizing display of gender equality on Albert’s part however, comes Emecheta’s ironic statement about the speaker’s need to preserve appearances for the sake of domestic harmony. Turning the tables on the Nora-Helmer relationship in Ibsen’s play, Emecheta complicates the familiar gender dynamics of family finance by making the wife earn more than the husband and by allowing her to be responsible for procuring the required mortgage for the house. The continuity between the two different bourgeois milieus, those of Ibsen and Emecheta is

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nevertheless maintained through another fundamental motif, that of pretence and role-playing. In Ibsen's nineteenth century play the Helmers' marital game of role-playing refers to the contemporary bourgeois social structure where men and women were allotted well delineated roles as breadwinners and caregivers, pertaining respectively, to the public and domestic spheres. In *Kehinde*, the socio-economic reality that shapes the migrant world of the Okolos is more complicated; as it seems to straddle multiple social, cultural and ethical paradigms entailed by their ethnic origin, their links with Nigeria as a Postcolonial nation and by the relative impact of the host country Britain upon their lives. Welfare and Post Welfare Britain, notwithstanding racism and the fraught conflicts regarding immigration policies, did not only welcome a huge immigrant population from Africa and the Caribbean, but also ensured that they be unconditionally subject to the policies of the State concerning health, childcare, education, housing and other major sectors. A paradigmatic shift in traditional gender relations and family dynamics was one of the most immediate impacts of these changes that the immigrant was subject to. In her early autobiographical novels *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* Emecheta had already pointed out the dualistic implications of these changes in the lives of Nigerian immigrants. In *Kehinde* too, the debate is continued through the deliberate juxtaposition of role-playing and its underlying tensions, reminding the audience of the fragility of the Helmers' make-believe world in a different cultural context. In between the lines where the couple exchanges views about their claims to the London house, the author introduces her own ironic statements:

He[Albert] was not unaware of the legal status of a wife here in London. In Nigeria, the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order...But Albert did

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not want trouble, so for the sake of peace he said ‘Our house’... It was because of her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage. But a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things. When Kehinde said ‘your house’, she was playing the role of the ‘good’ Nigerian woman...After sixteen years of marriage, they played this game without thinking. (4)

The ‘game’ they play at the beginning of the narrative, unlike the one that dominates the world of Ibsen’s play, is clearly the result of a mutual compromise, between traditional notions of the ‘good Nigerian woman’ as duty-bound and subservient and the legal mandates of gender equality that England has compelled them to observe. The game is suddenly disrupted in the opening chapter when Albert receives a letter from his sisters in Nigeria, urging him to return home to a country recently made prosperous by the ‘Oil boom’. Kehinde, expecting her third child and feeling slighted by Albert’s sudden decision to go back, leaving his family behind, decides to break the news of her pregnancy at this dramatic juncture. Emecheta uses the Ibsenian device of ‘the letter’ in the very opening chapter bearing the same title, as a theatrical device for introducing conflict and revelation. Jolted out of the reverie of their pretty make-believe English life, the couple suddenly discovers unresolved tensions in their marital relationship. While Kehinde begins suspecting Albert’s underlying intentions to return to Nigeria as a means to satisfy his unfulfilled longings to play the traditional patriarch, Albert sees Kehinde’s pregnancy as a feminine scheme devised on intention to thwart his plan of leaving England. At any cost, Albert decides to leave England, a ‘stupid country’ where ‘women rule’(15) for Nigeria, the home where he can now live in grand style as a ‘been-to’ man<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, he fulfills the dream of reverting to an indigenous patriarchy by transgressing against what is

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considered to be a taboo amongst his own people; that is, by sanctioning abortion. A Catholic convert hailing from a polygamous Igbo family that accorded special importance to motherhood and childbirth, Albert seems already to have severed his ties with tradition, when he compels Kehinde to abort the child much against her will to prevent financial obligations at this decisive point. Having performed this surgery upon his own traditional self, Albert manages to keep his plans intact. By terminating the pregnancy he fulfills dual necessities simultaneously; returning to Nigeria to try his luck and ensuring Kehinde's promotion at the bank for the sake of the money he will need soon.

The promise enveloped in the letter soon begins to take shape as Albert returns to Nigeria, marries an eligible woman with a university degree and a well paid job without the knowledge of his first wife and starts tasting of the luxury of a 'been-to' in his own country. In London Kehinde sits back unaware, waiting for the day she will earn enough to go back and join her husband in Nigeria. While she waits in anticipation, pursuing her job and minding her two children, the much coveted London-house begins to get dismantled right under her nose. The furniture and the old Jaguar, one of the most prized possessions of the couple are shipped off one by one to Lagos to fill Albert's new home, one that Kehinde soon discovers, she must learn to share not only with a co-wife, but with an endless retinue of in-laws from a polygamous family. Return to Nigeria completes Kehinde's institutionalization as a 'doll-wife', a role that she had only played complacently while staying in England. Mid-way into the narrative, the 'doll's house' paradigm becomes more recognisably Ibsenian than before, as the couple's mutual compromise in the past now tilts in favour of the man who finds himself invested with a new patriarchal authority. Emecheta's Kehinde becomes a pitiable echo of the helpless Nora of the first Act

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when she is ordered to do down on her knees and accept from Albert the ‘first housekeeping money in over eighteen years of marriage’(94). The narrative however, does not stop here in what Kehinde terms a ‘man’s world’(94) in a letter to her friend Moriammo in London. After a spell of bitter humiliation Kehinde is able to return to London when her good friend Moriammo sends money for the passage fare in response to the letter. Leaving behind the Lagos home as determinedly as Ibsen’s young rebel, Kehinde completes her journey only when she returns to the familiar ‘terrace house’ in London, the smell of which ‘welcomed her like a lost child’(108). Wrenching the ‘For Sale’ placard from the ground with determined strength and claiming the possession of the house defiantly, the immigrant seals her fate with that of the host country, turning her back determinedly on the illusion of leading a luxurious life in her homeland.

A curious echo of Ibsen’s slamming of the door on the engendered institution of the bourgeois family reverberates in the last pages of the novel. The final scene features a seasoned rebel in Kehinde who sits back unperturbed, immersed in the self possessed gesture of sipping sweet tea at her London home while her son, enraged by the revelation that the rent from the house is not his to claim as his father had promised, rushes into the street slamming the door noisily behind him. With gentle irony Emecheta describes how ‘The slamming of the street door echoed round the ageing house’ and eventually ‘died down’(141). The last scene keeps alive the revolutionary spirit of Ibsen’s drama by evoking the figure of ‘the rebel who happened to be your mother’(141). It does so however, not through a repetition of Ibsen’s final act but through important alterations and substitutions. By allowing the voice of Joshua, representing her absentee father’s legal and financial claims to the property to fade along with the sound of the street door, the narrative exorcises the universal claims of

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patriarchy handed down generationally from father to son. Further, by making the son leave the mother's house in a fit of rage instead of the reverse, the author refrains from confronting her protagonist with the fundamental choice between motherhood and independence. Emecheta's Kehinde, unlike Ibsen's Nora, has little need of juxtaposing motherhood against the sacred duties to her 'self'; nor does she explicitly terminate her marital bond. In answer to Joshua's query that the house belongs to his father as well, Kehinde says that she did not drive him away and that 'He's free to return any time he wants' (139). The right she claims rebelliously at the end of the novel is more than the right to her house, her job and her body; it is the quintessentially Ibsenian notion of the rights of a 'human'. In this final exchange between Kehinde and the spirit of her deceased twin Taiwo, the legacy of Ibsen is realised beyond the debate over motherhood and independence. When the protagonist tells Taiwo that "Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" (141), she is voicing her belief in a model of female emancipation where the identity of the wife and the mother is continuous, rather than in conflict with that of the human who values her self-worth as an independent being.

In answer to the 'woman question' as applicable to her own social situation, Emecheta provides her readers with the motif of the inverted journey, taking us inward into the warm house rather than out into the cold streets, into the depths of the self rather than its image in the outside world. The journey back home that costs Kehinde an emotional rift with her immediate family, also signals a reunion with the alter ego she found difficult to reconcile with in the past: the voice of her twin sister Taiwo who died at birth. The voice that begins playing in her head in decisive moments, filling her mind almost invariably with doubts and rebellious notions now declares itself as one with her own voice. As Taiwo whispers into Kehinde's



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ears 'Now we are one' (141), the narrative reaches a consensus between the voice of the living Kehinde, representing respect for traditional beliefs and that of her dead twin, representing time and again, the rebellious spirit that subverts traditional gender discourses. This closure allows the reader, like the protagonist, to transcend the schizophrenic process of engendering female identity through the juxtaposition of binaries like good and bad, self-less and selfish, traditional and modern. It keeps open the provisions for a dialogue between these binaries that so commonly feature in discourses on the nation, race, ethnicity and class identities.

In this context it may be argued that the internal dialogue that ends the novel is developed not in isolation, but as an outcome of continuous social exchanges between the women in the text. Kehinde's interactions with women other than the spirit of Taiwo; namely, her friend Moriammo in London, her sister Ifeyinwa in Lagos, her daughter Bimpe, her colleague Melissa, the tenant Amaka and even the co-patient Leah at the London clinic become instrumental in developing her consciousness as an individual. Apart from the oral interactions in English punctuated with Yoruba pidgin and untranslated Igbo and Yoruba words, Emecheta also appropriates the Ibsenian device of the 'letter' in *A Doll's House* as a mode of communication and confession practiced primarily by the women in the novel. The novel opens with reference to the ominous contents of the letter written by Albert's sisters urging him to return to Nigeria. The letter Albert takes care to open at the tea-table in the presence of his family bears tidings that Kehinde had long been anticipating. The second letter presented in the narrative is the terse one written by Albert to Kehinde from Nigeria. It has little to offer beyond the statement of changes in the family finance and a cursory description of his new job. In contrast to Albert's matter-of-fact letter, the letters exchanged by Kehinde and Moriammo are infused with warmth,

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spontaneity and the assurance of friendship that is lacking in the previous letter. In fact it is through the agency of the letter that Kehinde can call out for help from her close friend living overseas and eventually receive it, in the form of the transport fare to return to England that she can ill afford to pay presently. The letter brings together not just estranged friends and sisters, separated by the divisive power of religion and gender discourses; it also bridges the gap between generations by keeping the conversation between mother and daughter flowing across geographical barriers. In her letter to Kehinde, addressing her as 'dear special mother' (120) the daughter Bimpe congratulates her mother on her successful completion of a degree in sociology, reminding us of Emecheta's own career. The letter, like those of Kehinde and Moriammo, shares information alongside hopes and anxieties through the narration of everyday life in an intimate mode that is emblematic of Emecheta's own style. This last letter signifying the inseparability of the mother-daughter bonding celebrated so often in African women's texts implementing Alice Walker's concept of Womanism<sup>3</sup>, seems to complement *A Doll's House's* intriguing silence on the nature of a future relationship between Nora and her children. By keeping Kehinde's journey grounded (through its insistence on the immigrant's claims upon her house) as well as open-ended (through its ability to reach out to women across geographical, national, religious and cultural barriers), Emecheta seems to resolve many of the dilemmas posed by Ibsen's Nora and her ground-breaking rebellion.

### Endnotes

1. The first two London novels were published respectively in 1972 and 1974. In 1983 they were published together under the title 'Adah's story'. Before the publication of *Gwendolen* or *The Family* in 1989, however, Emecheta did not attempt another novel set in London. Kehinde was published in 1994 followed by *The New Tribe* in 2000.

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2. 'Been-to' was a colloquial form of address for the Western educated Nigerian man and by extension, his wife when they returned to their hometown. The address, which gained the status of a title of great respect features in several of Emecheta's novels, including *Second Class Citizen* and *Kehinde*.

3. Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* defines the Womanist mode of conduct as 'outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour...responsible. In charge. *Serious*'(5). In *African Wo/Man Palava*, a critical volume on Nigerian women writers, Ogunyemi draws upon the Walker's concept to define Womanism as "African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring – familial, communal, national, and international."(114)

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# TRANSCENDING - A Choice or a Need? A study in Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Series' and Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'

Barnana Hemaprava Sarkar

That very old tale about a crow decorating its butt with vibrant peacock feathers rings a thousand bells in today's climate of consistent transcendence. There is a subtle, murky line cutting right through the definitions of transgression and transcendence. One is considered a positive aspect of character, the other a flaw. One is expected out of ambition, the other should be avoided. One is what an individual strives to act upon in an entire lifetime, the other simply happens in the process. What truly strikes as the unsuitable note is when one process metamorphoses into the other, without any former acknowledgement of the doer. The crow managed to appear the way it wanted to, long slender feathers hanging loosely underneath its black shiny coat. However, through its newly branded costume, it had barely managed to cross a limit and never go beyond it. This is only one of the easiest explanations of what might result in if transgression is confused with transcendence. A murky zone from where escape is nearly impossible, a place which is so bleak in appearance that its identity can be easily deemed dubious. It is in this murky zone between transgression and transcendence that Elena Ferrante and Toni Morrison neatly place their characters, and let them either take a step ahead or change their entire course of action.

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Both Ferrante and Morrison have treaded upon the path of subtle but evident Class discrimination within one's own Race. The characters, their decisions, choices, and the conclusion of all that they decide to do and discard, are constantly driven by the urge to transcend. Go beyond what the limit is and sometimes unknowingly, though willingly, they begin to cross the limit. In this study of Class discrimination within Race, every character's role has been taken to account and an attempt has been made to decipher the authors' own journey beyond the line in order to be and not to be who they are.

The central characters in both the authors' works are bound by limitations that come with gender, race, and class. The central subjects of the novels deal with the revolting aspect of a character's digression from social conformity into an unending battle to break the wheel, and transcend. We see them digressing; for the most part the authors make sure they are greedy for what they should not be. When we meet Raffaella Cerullo in the 'Neapolitan Series' (2011-2012), more commonly addressed as Lila, Elena Ferrante puts her character under the spotlight of a watchfully gazing narrator, Elena Greco, or Lenu. Growing up in a poverty-stricken Naples, Lenu is constantly mesmerised by anything the girl-genius does. She says of Lila, "*She took the facts and in a natural way charged them with tension; she intensified reality as she reduced it to words, she injected it with energy*". Lila was a constant transcending force for Lenu that on a minute yet crucial level compelled our narrator to go beyond what was set as a limit for her. Other than drawing the picture of a girl who is intricately folded in her expression but is crystal clear about her intentions, Lenu also pinpoints the flamboyant rule of men in the neighbourhood and the constant victimisation of one gender by the other- even if the other is a victim itself.

Lila is presented to us as a genius with no money, a woman with an extreme zeal for power, and a girl thirsty for a pure form of love that

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she well knows does not exist in the world around her. Since the beginning she is the potential power that outranks the impotency of class structure around her. The daughter of a shoemaker who is beaten by the boys in the locality, hunted by the powerful Solaras, and thrown out of the window by her father, Lila- whether expectedly or unexpectedly- is the most ethereal representation of transcendence. Lenu gives out the hint in the very first pages of the series, where she writes, *“She meant something different: she wanted to vanish; she wanted every one of her cells to disappear, nothing of her ever to be found. And since I know her well, or at least I think I know her, I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world”*. Lila’s transcendence takes place across four books, but in the first book itself, Ferrante lets us know that she is not one of the “plebs” in their penurious neighbourhood. She is already beyond everything that exists. She taught herself to read and write at the minimum age of four, she designed her own collection of men’s leather shoes when she was merely a teenager, she chose to give away her doll and go beyond her age to purchase a book and read it cover to cover. And yet, Lila chose the most conventional method to climb up the social ladder- marriage. In her teacher’s words, *“The beauty of mind that Cerullo had from childhood didn’t find an outlet, Greco, and it has all ended up in her face, in her breasts, in her thighs, in her ass, places where it soon fades and it will be as if she had never had it”*. For a good part of the first two books in the series, we see Lila stagger through her early adulthood while Lenu manages to establish herself as an author of merit. Transcendence here begins to take a sinister turn when in spite of earning prestige, Lenu finds herself incapable of the greatness that Lila had once commanded her to achieve, *“you’re my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls”*. While there’s a lot of instances which can be given in order to justify

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the two girls' urge for a transcendental living, it can all be accumulated to one factor that both of them wanted a better world than what their parents had lived in- a world torn apart by the Second World War.

Growing up in the 1950s Naples, torn to pieces by the Nazis, Lila and Lenu find themselves born in the city's restoration phase. They come in a generation, which has been deemed as young and angry by an entire host of poets and writers, a generation who found themselves in a dilapidated world without any resource, any promise, only the waste of war as a reminder of what the human race has been. According to Rutgers University Associate Professor Paola Gambarota, "*the socioeconomic situation in Naples...was worse than anywhere else...Poverty there [in the '50s] meant you lived seven people to one room, and that there was nothing to eat. People with no shoes*" and education was certainly a luxury- one luxury that marked Lenu's transcendence beyond the boundaries of Naples, and Lila's transgression within the limits of Naples. It is almost like a blatant confession made by the narrator about the deserving one not having the privilege of achieving what they deserve but Fate deciding upon the non-deserving one to lead a better life. However, speaking of transcending engendering roles, it becomes quite clear about who actually transcends the social structure. Lenu leaves Naples, finds a family in the city, has her own daughters, a failed but prosperous marriage, and the fame of a recognised author whose voice is considered of relevance and importance. However, in Lenu's own words it is only Lila who lives a life beyond anything mortal. Transgressing for a brief while within the city's own limits, Lila climbs up the social ladder, staggers to her failure but once again returns with a blazing trail flamed by knowledge, conviction, and an utterly incorruptible mind. She teaches herself the daily use of modern technology, she runs her own business, unlike any other

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woman of her generation, she gives birth to a daughter who is already brighter than all the kids her age, and finally she leaves it all behind and calmly dematerialises in her own existence. Lila stands as a perishable instance of modification that perhaps an entire gender went through in order to establish a fact as simple as Equality For All. Lila is, subjectively speaking, the only character in the book who comes across as humane in all her impulsive aspiration, and at the same time, she is the only character who stands as an illustrious representation of Ferrante. Elena Ferrante, a pseudonym for a woman who has kept herself under garbs from the ever transparent fame of the 21st Century, can be counted as a transcendental concept of the author who not only surpassed the ideas of race and class but moulded the concept of identity and let it lurk in the secretly comfortable zone between reality and fiction.

What strikes as a common aspect in the works of both Ferrante and Morrison is the transition from resistance to transcendence. In Morrison's 1970 novel, 'The Bluest Eye', transcendence subtly mixes with transgression when talking about the concerned central character. Like Lila, Pecola Breedlove, is constantly perceived under the watchful gaze of the narrator- only this time the narrator is kind. A little black-skinned girl who is constantly scrutinised as an ugly creature by her community, Pecola's plight is often a consequence of victimising the victim by another victim. A concept Ferrante notoriously explores in the first instalment of her Neapolitan Series. The men in Ferrante's work are immediately tumultuous in their approach, the men in Naples are hungry for food, for water, for space, for power. These are the men coming from the post-war generation, the angry young men whom John Osborne immortalised in his 1956 play, 'Look Back In Anger'. Jimmy Porter is a man very about everything around him, and although the play seems to make an attempt to justify this man's abusive tone, his chauvinistic approach



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is quite easily recognisable. Dan Rebellato, Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, commented about the play in his essay, ‘An Introduction to Look Back In Anger’, “Jimmy’s targets are not carefully selected, and his spirit seems more anarchic than anything else”. The point to be noted here is the fact that Jimmy’s targets are not carefully selected- neither are the men of Naples’ nor is Cholly Breedlove’s.

Cholly’s story takes us on a parallel journey where we see him as a regular man, lustfully in love, but threatened by those with lighter skin tone. He is ordered to behave like a creature, to go wild with his desires, and what he later does to Pecola, is a vengeful act breeding out of his own embarrassment. Pecola wanted a pair of the bluest eyes, a beauty feature to be owned only by the Oppressor; similarly, Cholly too wished to be beyond the limit set for him by the Oppressor. However, as trained as his mind could be, he never once blames the Oppressor for the ill of his life. He, instead, chooses the “Second Gender” to flung his wrath upon. Morrison mentions in the book, *“Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke”*. Cholly’s transgression takes a sadistic turn when the old laws of chauvinism take over him- he the man, the ruler of the “Second Gender”, a man who is a slave to other men even a slave to the white-skinned “Second Gender” but he is after all a man. One who is destined to forcefully take upon the weaker creature of the weaker, more minor, community of society. Cholly, a victim of discrimination, chooses to avenge his own ill-fate by victimising someone weaker than him. Weaker not by the physical sense of the term, by weaker by definition, weaker by

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construct. His immediate transgression, his act to not go beyond but merely cross the limit, makes him take the backseat alongside Pecola but it is only through the chief narrator, Claudia that Morrison finally seeks transcendence beyond engendering definitions. Claudia is what sets the yardstick between an entire community that forgets to admire itself under the rule of the Oppressor, and one human being who is destined to be just the Oppressed, and nothing more.

On a similar ground as Lila, Pecola did not have to wait for a separate community to abuse her for being different. That discrimination started way earlier at home, and continued with neighbours, teachers, classmates, and lastly parents. While in Lila's case the narrator hovered upon her like an absent presence, commenting on every move she made, Pecola falls under the gaze of multiple narrators all of who try to justify their own reaction towards the so-called "ugliness" of the little black girl. Claudia takes note of the fact, *"Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world..."*. Claudia, thereafter, justifies Pecola's greed for a pair of the bluest eyes- the paramount feature of beauty. But where does Pecola's greed take her? It is not the pursuit of brilliance like Lila, nor is it a scheme that can ultimately help her rise above everything else around her. It is nothing more than that very humane urge to fit in- an urge similarly shared by Cholly, the men of Naples, Lenu, and to some extent Lila, too. That's all that Pecola perhaps ever wanted- to fit in, to belong, to be recognised, to be among the conventional pretty ones who are easy in the eyes. Raped by her father, shamed by her community, Pecola's ultimate descent to madness is exactly what takes form out of a misguided transcending act that converts itself to the dismissive act of transgression.

Unlike Lila, who chose to break out of the role imposed upon her by

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society, Pecola- a lot like the crowd- chose to put on a different appearance. She wanted a pair of the bluest eyes there is, and her desire to be a little like the oppressor is neatly foiled by her father, Cholly Breedlove's transformation into the Oppressor from the Oppressed. In her book, *'Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism'*, bell hooks claims, "*in patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power-women and children*". What can this act be called? Transcendence or Transgression?

Claudia is the only one who manages to draw a fine line between the standardised definition and a more lucid form of definitions. Unlike her fellow narrators, Claudia does not despise black or white; Pecola is just as important as the other white girls who make appearances throughout the novel, and whose attractiveness serve as the perfect scale to measure beauty. Claudia transcends in the truest sense of the term when she gives up on any definition, and deems beauty as something that lies in the eyes of the beholder. We find her concerning over an unborn child who will receive the similar hatred as its mother if society does not alter the way it judges beauty. Claudia quietly confesses, "*More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live-just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals*". Claudia remains impassive in her treatment of the situation but at the same time, just like Lenu, she is incapable of keeping herself away from the impending doom that is about to set upon a friend.

To transcend perhaps does not mean to indulge in disobedience or revolt. To transcend perhaps only means to make the best of whatever limit has been set in your way. But why the urge to transcend? Why the urge to be a little better than they already are? Is it only a selfish desire loosely hanging upon a virtuous need to prosper or is it an

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inflicted resolution resulting out of years of torture, abuse, maltreatment and misery? Perhaps the latter. Why would Lila teach herself to read and write in the first place when her parents couldn't? Why did Lenu dream of a nicer home, better clothes and a sharper mind when her parents were ordinary, good people? Why did Pecola wish for the bluest eyes when her kind clearly possess their own set of shining dark eyes? Why was it so important for Cholly to impose his power when he clearly knew what power did to people? These series of rhetorical questions are what lead the act of choosing to go beyond. Discrimination is nothing but putting aside a particular kind. The ones with less wealth, the ones with different skin tone, the ones with a shorter height, the ones with a lower pitch- all put aside in a margin. Perhaps that is why the crow's story isn't exactly right for the moral it teaches us- be comfortable with what you are- but more about letting one remain comfortable in what they are.

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# Surpanakha- More Hated than Hateful: Exploring the Possible Nuances of Mytho-fiction in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

Manisha Bhattacharya

## **Abstract:**

Kavita Kané is a magnificent writer of mythological fictions, popularly known as “mytho/ mythic fictions” where mythology is not about molding the old fables in a newer fashion but treating it as a literary technique since there has always been an intermingling of literature and mythology. Kané is more engaged with those women characters, silenced and eradicated from subject-position of history like Sita's sister Urmila or the fisher woman Satyavati who was elevated in power to become a queen of the Kuru dynasty, established a matriarchy and navigated the destiny of her family and Hastinapur; or an overlooked character like Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* (2016) or the traitorous Menaka of *Menaka's Choice* (2015). She explores an alternative narrative by making Surpanakha or Menaka or Satyavati hold the centre before it gets shifted again. She considers mythology as a blank space and imprints contemporary ideas merging them with old folk tales to re-create and re-interpret different characters and to create modern sensibilities against a social canvas. This paper will try to establish that mythologies are enmeshed with socio-political, moral and philosophical tinges; they not only narrate the stories of legends but deduce different aspects of

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one's life, celebrate human spirit, and address the human incompetency as well. It is not about magnificence or grandeur or nobility of one person but humanity in general that mythology deals with. We mostly perceive mythology through a man's point of view whereas Kané here approaches it through the women – it could be Gandhari, Kunti, Radha, Tara, Mandodari or Surpanakha. Surpanakha born as Meenakshi, "the one with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes", ends up being perceived as "ugly and untamed, brutal and brazen"; one whose nose was "castrated" by Lakshmana, and the one who fuelled a war in Ramayana. But was she just reduced to an instigator of war? Or was she sacrificed in the process? Was she the "Lanka's princess" or the cause for its annihilation? – These are the questions that the paper will try to pose.

**Key Words:** Mytho-fiction, Surpanakha, Princess, Victim, Hated, Hateful.

The word "myth" has been derived from modern Latin "mythus", via Late Latin from Greek word, "muthos". "Mythos" is the term used by Aristotle in Poetics for 'plot' as one of the six elements of tragedy. According to Elizabeth Belfiore's *Tragic Pleasures; Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*, Aristotle examined that "plot is essential to tragedy; ethos [character] is second to plot" ("Mythos"). Aristotle believes that "psychological and ethical considerations are secondary to the events themselves" ("Mythos"). Aristotle focused on 'mythos' (plot) over 'ethos' (character) or "conflict either in the sense of struggle within a person or in the sense of the clashing of opposed principles" ("Mythos"). Aristotle elucidates how tragedy is an imitation of human lives and actions than human beings themselves. Aristotle highlighted the universally coherent events of plot than the specific and incoherent conflicts between characters related with these

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events. On the contrary, the novel *Lanka's Princess* (2016) by Kavita Kané focused more on the “ethos” or the conflicts and crisis of the characters than the “mythos” or plots itself. Kané was inspired by the discourse of modern Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp who “reverses Aristotle's theory by writing that stories are about characters who act” (“Mythos”). Propp also argues that basic story elements, which he defines as functions, “are in fact ethically colored, either in themselves or because they are defined in terms of a character that has specific ethical qualities” (“Mythos”). Ethical conflicts between characters are the focal point of Kané’s novel.

In an article in *The Hindu* titled “Myth for Modern Times”, the author, Anusha Parthasarathy, comments on the reworking of the term ‘myth’ by writers like Amish Tripathi. For Amish Tripathi, as stated in the article, “the very word mythology which is derived from the Greek term ‘mythos’ means to hide the truth and it is up to us to discover it through the story” (Parthasarathy n.pag). Further, quoting Tripathi, he said:

Probably the only ancient civilization that has kept its myths alive even today is India. This is not because the other myths aren’t as rich as ours but because we have understood the philosophy behind them. Myths are not about the stories but about the message you spread through them. And as societies and beliefs change, myths have to change along with them. Modernising and localising myths are ways of keeping them relevant in modern times. (qtd. in Parthasarathy n.pag.)

And indeed, ‘modernising’ and ‘localising’ myths have led to a new trend in Indian Writing in English, questioning the established hierarchy and producing new voices beyond stereotypes. “Mythic fiction”, a term coined by Charles de Lint and Terri Windling is a kind of literature that draws its source from motifs, symbols and analogies

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of mythical legends, and folk tales. Mythic fiction can sometimes be used interchangeably with “urban fantasy” since it overlaps the boundary of “fantasy fiction”, yet it sometimes incorporates contemporary works in non-urban setting too. But this is in contrast to “mythopoeia”, such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C.S Lewis or George R. R. Martin that create their own legends and folklore or initiate wholly new pantheons. The breakdown of grand narratives which accompanied the advent of post modernism, leads to the alternate narratives to be explored. Retelling the myth becomes a part of the small narratives that can overthrow the powerful hold of the Hindu myths which is a part of the grand narratives.

We find many important writers involving in this new genre like Ashok K Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kané among others. Interestingly, the women writers experimented with this genre by putting forth the silent women figures to the forefront. We find Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (in *The Palace of Illusions*) delving deep into the events of Kurukshetra from Draupadi’s perspective, similarly like Kané’s *Karna’s Wife* or *Sita’s Sister* which unfurled the events from the viewpoints of Uruvi, Karna’s wife and Urmila, Lakshmana’s wife respectively; thus producing an alternative narrative and deconstructing the patriarchal way of story-telling. Kané in an interview defended her subject: “I was curious about her, and I wanted to see how as a writer, I could handle her. I needed to understand why there was so much negativity surrounding her” (Tushar n.pag). Kané did an extensive research to comprehend different intricacies and nuances of Surpanakha. “Society has always ridiculed her. We take her role in the *Ramayana* so lightly, when in fact she’s such a crucial character. And then she has been sidelined through the rest of the epic, whereas her brother Ravana is more fleshed out. I wanted to humanize her and make her real to people,”



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(Tushar n.pag.) she comments. However, Kané concludes that her racy account of Surpanakha is not any kind of justification that she has offered. “I’m not saying they were heroes. They were people with flaws. That’s the beauty of mythology. Every character has shades of grey, and they make you think and question,” (Tushar n.pag.) she comments.

*Lanka’s Princess* narrates the life of Princess Meenakshi, the only daughter of Rishi Vishravas and demon Kayikeshi and sister of Ravana, Kumbhakaran and Vibhishana. Meenakshi, born in a family intrinsic to war and violence, is ignored and mistreated by her mother and brothers, and condemned by her father. Thus her chances of being happy are sacrificed letting her soul driven by spite and anger. It was these circumstances that shaped her character and made her unleash that spite by initiating a battle between Rama and Ravana in Ramayana. Her book unfolds and traces this transformation from a kind, soulful Meenakshi into a violent, vengeful and deceitful Surpanakha which will make us sympathize with the distressful nefarious protagonist.

‘Yes, I am a monster!’ screeched Meenakshi, her eyes flashing, baring her claws at her mother. ‘See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Surpanakha!’ (Kané 89)

Surpanakha, Ravana’s famous sister— ugly and untamed, brutal and brazen— this is often how she is generally portrayed in dominant fictions; one whose nose was maimed by Lakshmana which consequently fuelled a war. ‘Surpanakha’, connoting a woman ‘as sharp as talon’, was born as ‘Meenakshi’ — the one ‘with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes’, is often the most misrecognized and misjudged character in the *Ramayana*. Accused of being a manipulator between Rama and Ravana, which culminated into the destruction of her family, Kavita Kané’s *Lanka’s Princess* makes us see the familiar

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events unfurl through the unfamiliar eyes of a woman who is more “hated than hateful”.

Kayikeshi could never provide her with the succor and love that a daughter deserves to receive. It was not Ravana or Vibhishana, but Kumbhakaran who was her constant support and voice of wisdom, sometimes. When Kuber’s tried to abduct Meenakshi, he was taken aback by her spirit to fight back with her sharp nails. But her mother was exasperated at Rishi Vishravas’ “cowardliness” that despite being the father figure he was proved to be helpless during this sudden onslaught. Meenakshi was ashamed and embarrassed by her father’s defenseless motion as he used to admire him silently. She was vexed that her father, putting aside his vanity and dignity, begged to Kartiviryarjun for Ravana’s rescue. The realization that her father actually never loved her unquestioningly now dawned upon her.

Secondly, her husband Vidyujiva’s demise makes her decide that she desires to avenge his death by obliterating him from the surface of the earth. She decides to leave Lanka and stay with her uncle Mareecha in Dandaka forest along with her son Kumar in order to train him to be warrior who can build a bulwark against Ravana’s prowl. There she loses her identity as Meenakshi, and decides to become the vengeful Supanakha. She became vehemently violent when her son was assassinated mistakenly by Lakshmana; hence Rama and Lakshmana were added to her list. She understands that Sita can be used as a ploy in this game of destruction: “Sita would be the cause and she, Surpanakha would be that culprit to precipitate the mayhem” (Kané 210).

In another such instance in Dandaka forest, Rama and Lakshmana toyed with her emotion by asking her to approach each other in a zestful manner which was an act of condemnation, debasement and much degradation. She stood perplexed in the middle watching the

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two brothers with deceptive and cruel appearance, grinning surreptitiously, and sharing a secret jest; she was the jest. As Ram implored Lakshmana not to kill but maim her as a way of ‘abjecting’ her, she reverts back that it was the duo that killed Taraka, her grandmother and Subahu, her uncle. And Surpanakha’s introspection and grievance at this juncture is quite justified: “Was that why they had laughed at me, ridiculing me in their contempt and amazement, their arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanities?” (Kané 202). The “monstrous femininity” is incorporated by the patriarchal society to reinforce “submissive femininity” as a norm. Those who transgress the boundary of chastity, piousness, virtuosity, marital stability, attributed to women, suffer the fate of “castration” like Surpanakha.

Surpanakha also breaks the fabricated ideals of piousness and chastity of the royalty hinting at Rama’s efforts to make his wife a ‘pure woman’ in a trial by fire at Lanka. Surpanakha justly questions whether this was an act of freedom or humiliation. In spite of being an ideal and upright king, Rama compelled Sita to perform ‘Agnipariksha’ to prove to the world that she was innocent, virtuous and untouched by Ravana. Torn apart between performing his royal duties and personal relationships, the king in him took over to perform his duty even if it meant sacrificing the woman he loved.

In Samhita Arni’s dystopic mythological thriller *The Missing Queen* (2013), set in the recognizable subcontinent of today, Surpanakha’s is a story that challenges the authoritative version in two ways—as a desiring woman and as an ‘alien’ woman. Years after the main incidents narrated in the epic have occurred, and after the mysterious disappearance of Sita, an unnamed female narrator sets out on an obsessive search for the missing Ayodhyan queen, meeting along the way, several marginal characters that shed light on the Ayodhya-Lanka war. Surpanakha is now working as a militant with the Lankan

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Liberation Front, and she clarifies to the journalist narrator that she had desired Lakshmana, not Rama, that Lakshmana had teased her and that her face had been disfigured because it was considered unacceptable to kill a woman under the Ayodhya code of honour. The link between female vanity and desire, and her disfigurement is made clear here, and reminds us of the horribly misogynistic contemporary practice - though there the reason is the thwarting of male desire and not the violent suppression of female desire. Lakshmana, she rants, is “a man so narrow-minded that he can’t imagine a woman has needs and wants and can act on them”(Arni 76). Reflecting on Ayodhya in general, she remarks, “ In Ayodhya, it seems, people are fond of locking up their women, drawing circles in the dust to contain them, looking up skirts at every opportunity to check that a woman’s virginity or virtue is intact...Lankans are different! We believe in freedom and equality” (Arni 78). However, it is important to note that Surpanakha is not entirely blameless — proud and self-absorbed, she clearly manipulates everybody she can to avenge her dishonour. But, this is a result of the abuse and malign she has faced and her transition from a beautiful seductress to an embittered, vengeful woman seems to the narrator to be the greatest tragedy of all.

Amit Chaudhuri’s short story ‘An Infatuation’ in the excellent anthology of essays, ruminations and creative interpretations: *In Search of Sita — Revisiting Mythology* (also published as ‘Surpanakha’ in *The Little Magazine*) is a short narration of Surpanakha’s humiliation, which paints an unflattering portrait of Rama and Lakshmana. Here, the conventional structure of romance narratives is clearly inverted, such that Surpanakha is the one attracted, stalking, nervous and desperate, and Rama experiences, “for the first time, the dubious and uncomfortable pleasure of being the object of pursuit”( Chaudhuri 15). Amused and flattered, Rama plays along for a while, before turning to Lakshmana with casual

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cruelty and asking him to teach her a lesson for her ‘forwardness’. Lakshmana promptly obliges, though the mutilation happens off-stage so to speak, and we hear of its description from her heartless perpetrator, who compares her to a beast in agony. Bewildered and pained, “that the one she’d worshipped should be so without compassion, so unlike what he looked like” (Chaudhuri 20), she goes looking for Ravana. Almost in a continuation to this plotline, is the powerful scene in Atul Satya Kaushik’s celebrated play *Raavan Ki Ramayan*, where Surpanakha is reliving that nightmarish episode in Ravana’s court. On being taunted about her use of dark magic to transform into a beautiful woman to seduce the man she desires, she lashes out at the insidious patriarchal matrix, whereby her brother kills her husband and promises her a man of her choosing but which also precludes that a man of her choice should desire her in return, given the harsh and uncompromising standards of female beauty which disqualify her without the use of deception. Her choice was no choice at all, she laments, something that Sita too would soon discover when Ravana comes to exploit the loophole in the code book of patriarchy, whereby a Kshatriya wife must not step out before an unknown man, yet a Kshatriya daughter-in-law must not anger a Brahmin by disobeying him.

Whereas Kavita Kané’s *Lanka’s Princess* takes a largely indulgent view of Surpanakha and traces her tragic journey to becoming the monster she has always made to feel she was. After Sita’s abduction, the two women finally confront each other in Lanka. Surpanakha asks Sita who it was who loved her more, Rama or Ravana, given that Sita had sacrificed a lot for Ram, but that Ravana had staked a lot for her sake, a question that is sure to haunt Sita in later years after her return to Ayodhya. Sita in turn asks her if the whole point of the war was to assuage Surpanakha’s hurt ego, because the two men had spurned Surpanakha’s advances. To this, the latter demands, “If they

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found me so crass and crude and unwelcome, could they not have just politely refused me like the chivalrous warriors they claim themselves to be?” (Kané’ 189) and asks why Rama had toyed with her instead. Sita’s unuttered thoughts are significant — “How could she explain to Surpanakha that in the world in which she lived, there was a deep suspicion of women’s power and desirability flaunted so openly and when unchecked by male control. Surpanakha’s overt sexuality had taken the men by surprise, amused them greatly and they had played along till the amusement had gone awry”. Sita is uncomfortable with her husband’s violence in this episode, as much as she is both, admiring and uneasy with Surpanakha’s forthrightness. Surpanakha in turn wonders if Rama’s reaction was more attributable to his guilt at a possible attraction he had momentarily felt towards her.

In Telugu writer Volga’s novel translated into English by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree as *The Liberation of Sita*, four of the five stories revolve around Sita’s interactions with marginalized female characters from the epics, each of whom teaches her important life lessons from their own experiences, as well as the significance of real and forged sisterhoods in one’s emancipation, the true meaning of which Sita realizes in her own time and at different stages and tribulations of life. In ‘The Reunion’, it has been years since the war of Lanka has been fought, and Sita has been abandoned in the forest, where she is now rearing her sons. Surpanakha is an object of pity for Sita, as she recollects how Rama and Lakshmana had ‘tricked’ and mutilated her, all with the intention of provoking her brother Ravana into war. Sita admonishes her sons against judging Surpanakha as ‘ugly’ on the basis of her external appearance and seeks her company out of curiosity about the beautiful garden that Surpanakha is rumoured to have nurtured, which surpasses all others in beauty. Sita expects to meet a woman who is resigned to her fate, lonely and

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channeling her yearning for beauty and love into the garden and its flowers. Instead, she finds peace, wisdom and dignity on Surpanakha's face and the latter is moved by the kindness, affection and maturity that she finds in Sita. Surpanakha relates her brave tale of overcoming her bodily disfigurement, grappling with body image issues, contemplating suicide, grappling with crippling hatred, jealousy and spite. Interestingly, it is in the lap of nature, and not under human tutelage, that Surpanakha learns to appreciate true beauty and love another part of her body — her hands. Thus she now uses her hands to create things and serve others, instead of lamenting the loss of that bit of herself that was more a sign of her vanity than anything else. When Sita remarks that Surpanakha is genuinely beautiful and not in need of male appreciation, Surpanakha is quick to interject that not all men are destructive and hateful and that she has found meaningful companionship with one such man, though also maintaining that she has come to understand that “the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man” (Kumar and Vijayasree 67). She warns Sita gently against making the mainstay of her existence the upbringing of her sons, who would inevitably leave the forest to join the kingdom in the city. Sita is touched by Surpanakha's ‘unsolicited kindness’ and teaches her sons to never forget their way to Surpanakha's garden.

Surpanakha's story, in all its longing, desire, self-pity, vanity and dignity, is being scripted anew, by women and men. Kané has read her as Adrienne Riche has argued the act of entering an old text anew is not just a chapter in Cultural Revolution for women, but their very act of survival. This new alternative account of Surpanakha could deconstruct the godly image that Rama carved and thus build up a more humane image to the demons with their human strength and weakness. Though the tale of Meenakshi is heart wrenching, it also speaks volumes about the strength, integrity, dignity of a woman who

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has survived love, loss and rejection, only to rise up from her ashes and to chart out her battle proudly against the world.

Kavita Kané has not prototyped Surpanakha in binaries, either as a “saint or sinner” or “betrayed or betrayed”; she simply has voiced her part of the story which was unheard of. The incredible prologue and epilogue sequences make us wonder if we shall remember Meenakshi as a princess, beloved, warrior or devil. This is a retelling of the hyper-masculine epic from Surpanakha’s perspective; there is a marked shift in the tale from the ‘other’ to the ‘self’.

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# The Female Superhero: Politics of Sexuality and the Attempts to Transcend the Boundaries of 'Gender'

Soumyosree Banerjee

'Superhero' is a trope that emerged in the 1930s as American comics' arcs introduced a long catalogue of characters possessing preternatural qualities. While they are sketched almost like the modern representation of the classical epic hero, their sense of ideology depicts Nietzsche's notion of the 'Übermensch'. A currently popular section within the trope of magic realism, these 'superheroes' however, have often come under the scanner of criticism for their frequent manifestation of the archetypal gendered portrait. Most of the female superheroes, initially referred to as 'superheroines' or 'she-roes' are often portrayed as a collective embodiment of seduction and hyper-sexuality. In this paper, I would like to locate the history of introduction of some of the leading female superheroes from the popular comic universes and how, despite the sexist approach and the patriarchal reception, these characters in the comics as well as in their popular adaptations have attempted to liberate themselves from the panopticon of gender-roles and gender-identities. The characters that I would focus on are Wonder Woman, Mera, Captain Marvel, Scarlet Witch and Black Widow.

Wonder Woman is one of the earliest female superheroes who appeared first in 'All Star Comics' #8 by DC comics in 1941. Also known as 'Princess Diana of Themyscira, Daughter of Hippolyta', the

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character is a non-human, demigod-like delineation who had no father but was created by Zeus. American psychologist and writer William Moulton Marston and artist Henry G. Peter were the creators of this portrait. Marston had based this character on his wife Elizabeth and their life partner Olive Byrne. While Marston intended to create a superhero who would break the archetypal representation as the epitome of fist-power 'masculinity' but would triumph through love and genuine emotions, his wife Elizabeth had suggested to make this character a 'woman'. The vignette was sketched at a time when birth-control was a recently introduced subject in the feminist movement and was being widely propagated. In fact, Byrne's mother Ethel was a Progressive Era activist who had opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States along with her sister Margaret Sanger. The origin history of Wonder Woman in the narrative manifests how Hippolyta was still a mother without biologically birthing a daughter.

It was also the time when American and European women denounced their long overflowing Victorian gowns and mini-skirts became an empowering trend. If one observes the attire of Wonder Woman in the first comic publication, she is seen clad in a blue short skirt and a red bodice which while not sexualising her, focuses on her athletic and muscular features. Marston therefore through her character, normalises and encourages the freedom of the woman's body. Raised together by her mother and her aunts Antiope and Menalippe in an Amazonian island nation, solely inhabited by women, Wonder Woman is a depiction that is often labelled as 'feminist'. Marston and later George Perez paints a character who without denouncing the socially conceptualized 'feminine' appearance and attire entirely, attempts to transcend the notions of 'female' and 'feminine'. They did not create her with the physical attributes of a male body to show her as an empowered reflection but

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had attempted to preserve the 'female' in her while challenging the socially imposed 'femininity'. A particular tributary of the narrative shows Wonder Woman's active participation in the second World War, where her primary weapons were her bracelets, her tiara, a lasso of truth, a sword and a shield. Again the word 'woman' in her name was probably a similar effort as Marston intended to portray how the concept of a 'superhero' was gender-neutral. Her civilian identity is called Diana Prince, the name subtly focusing on her sexuality. Her two identities, separated by the titles of 'Princess' and 'Prince' probably hint at her bisexuality considering the fact that she grew up in an all-women's nation and later developing feelings for the first man that she meets. Also, the juxtaposition in her name 'Diana Prince' where a female name is followed by a male epithet stands as a testimony. While the name Wonder Woman stands for the 'new woman' who redefines the Victorian 'angel in the house' thus challenging the gender-identities that have been imposed on women by patriarchy for centuries, 'Diana Prince' questions the binaries of gender. This probably also focuses on Carl Jung's concept of animus and anima or Sigmund Freud's study of 'innate bisexuality' as observed in his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1920). Diana Prince is sketched wearing a bodysuit or trousers which were essentially a 'man's attire' in major parts of Europe and the U.S. This again was an attack on patriarchy that only a few decades earlier had criminalised 'cross-dressing' barring women from dressing like a 'man'. Debuted in *Sensation Comics* in 1942, Diana Prince was initially an army nurse who was later portrayed as a military officer, a businessperson, an astronaut and in several high rank positions that were mainly male-dominated.

Wonder Woman, who is portrayed as a founding member of the Justice League, a team of superheroes, is primarily a warrior whose strength is at par with the male superheroes of the league. Several

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arcs of the DC galaxy have shown her fighting both mythological and fictional 'supervillains'. However a few individual tributaries of the narrative attempt to restrict her within the panopticon of the patriarchal gaze. In 'Red Son Wonder Woman', the titular character deliberately turns into a weapon of mass destruction to avenge her unreciprocated feeling thus her character being reduced to an insensible and illogical, weak being. In the Justice League animated series aired on Cartoon Network, Wonder Woman is seen to be an easy victim who is the first person to be corrupted and who then goes on to corrupt every other member. Again Frank Miller's 'Man-hunting Woman of Wonder' shows her as a 'feminazi' who hates on men and is one dimensionally violent. However, despite the variations, the primary portrayal which was adapted first in a television series in 1974 where Lynda Carter played the role of the protagonist to the recent Gal Gadot's representation in the live-action DC Extended Universe movie Wonder Woman (2017), the aim was to challenge the concept of imposed gender and highlight a female superhero who was not restricted within the boundaries of her socially constructed gender.

DC has a wide range of female superheroes who constantly question the gender stereotypes. Mera, created by Jack Miller and Nick Cardy, first appeared in 'Aquaman' #11 in September 1963. Though initially sketched as a supporting portrait, her character develops slowly, soon overpowering the protagonist. Manifested as the queen of the oceans, Mera emerges both as the epitome of strength and intelligence. In the comic strips, she is painted as wearing a bodysuit therefore again mocking the patriarchal discourse. Her image is similar to that of Ariel from 'The Little Mermaid'; both the characters having red hair and green attire. A mermaid is often symbolically associated with femininity as well as virginity. While Ariel is portrayed as young as in her late teens, Mera is mature and a skilled warrior. As Mera is not

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seen emerging as a solo hero like Wonder Woman, her character is not allowed enough space to flourish. Despite the limited spacious and temporal representation, Mera is a vignette who constantly tries to have an identity beyond her gender roles. While multiple loose strands of the narrative follow a storyline that focuses on her complicated relationship with Aquaman and her deprived motherhood, Mera still is an epitome of female strength. In the primary tributary, she also depicts psychological issues like unbridled anger, a trait that is often associated with masculinity. However, while toxic masculinity glorifies and romanticises anger, Mera's traits are treated with utmost sensibility. In the plot of 'Blackest Night', Mera's statement:

“I never wanted children”

is not just a trick to distract and attack her enemy but is also an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal practice of putting motherhood on the altar. It therefore discards the imposed gender role and the socially indoctrinated notion that motherhood is the ultimate aim of every woman.

The character of Carol Susan Jane Danvers or as more popularly known as Captain America is a popular female superhero. Often regarded as 'Marvel's biggest female hero' or 'Marvel's mightiest Avenger', Danvers was sketched by writer Roy Thomas and artist Gene Colan. Her human identity was an officer in the United States Air Force and Security Chief in a restricted military premise. The early comics portrayed Captain Marvel with long hair, a red cropped top, thigh high shorts or thongs and boots therefore creating a hyper-sexualised image. This has been a major concurrent problem with male artists drawing a female superhero. While on one hand the superheroes would be endowed with power and position that attempted to topple the archetypal feminine characterisation, on the

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other hand the constant sexualisation and often pornographic delineations to attract more male readers problematised the entire idea of transcending ‘gender’.

In one of the arcs of Captain Marvel titled ‘The Avengers’ #200 published in October 1980 and written by Bob Layton, David Michelinie, George Perez and Jim Shooter, the narrative shows how Captain Marvel despite her unparallel superhuman strength is manipulated, raped and impregnated. This comic strip was severely criticised by later critics for its unnecessary depiction of violence. However, the Captain Marvel series witnessed gradual changes beginning with a uniform that was more appropriate for her military background. She was also depicted as a leading activist in the Feminist movement, voicing for equal pay. The comic arc by Michele Fazakas and Tara Butters was the first to show Captain Marvel clad in a full-length jumpsuit and with cropped hair, therefore focusing on her athletic features. In the graphic novel titled ‘Captain Marvel in Rise of the Alpha Flight’, Marvel states:

“It’s not that I’m a violent person, it’s just that some things really really need punching”

As depiction of power is quintessentially a man’s trait, this ‘unfeminine’ quality is almost a mockery of archetypal feminine portrait.

In one of the tributaries of the series, writer Roger Stern and artist John Romita Jr. illustrated an African-American superhero, who was titled the second Captain Marvel and was the ‘leader’ of the Avengers for some time. Originally known as Monica Rambeau, the character is allowed a platform as broad as Captain Marvel’s in order to develop, at a time that was still fighting America’s racist rantings and the Eurocentric binaries of the civilised and the uncivilised. Kamala Khan is a recent addition to the legacy of Marvel. Created by writer

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G. William Wilson, artists Adrian Alphonso and Jamie McKelvie and editors Sana Amanat and Stephen Wacker, Khan is depicted as a teenager Pakistani-American girl who adopts the label of Miss Marvel inspired by her idol Carol Danvers. The character which was introduced in the MCU in 2013, probably to deal with Islamophobia, is seen wearing a uniform that is similar to their traditional dress- 'salwar-kameez', her cape mirroring a 'dupatta'. However, the lack of a 'hijab' is probably an attempt to keep the character dissociated from any institutionalised religious sentiment. The storyline not only highlights her confrontation with the evil supervillains but also the evil that is deeply embedded into various cultures. The comic manifests her daily conflicts with the gender identity that has been imposed upon her by her family. While her brother emerges as an ideal patriarchal conservative, her mother is the ultimate representation of a marginalised woman who is unaware and uneducated and remains paranoid that Kamala might touch a boy and get pregnant therefore losing her 'honour'.

However, the 2019 movie titled 'Captain Marvel' is the first feature film of the superhero. Played by Brie Larson, Marvel here looks like the one in the comics sketched by Kelly Sue DeConnick and characterised by Stan Lee. The movie has been regarded as a 'feminist' adaptation by leading film reviewers as Larson takes up a character that throughout the movie attempts to get out of the panopticon of gender. Portrayed through a series of flash-backs, Danvers shows how she was trying to cope with a constant demoralisation as her every failure would be associated with her biological sex. Jody Houses takes this up in her graphic publication 'Captain Marvel Braver and Mightier' (2019) as the titular character states in an interview when asked what advice she would have for her younger self:

"I'd tell she's right...everything she dreams of doing, everything she

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was told she couldn't do.”

Larson however, was put at the receiving end of online ‘trolling’ for portraying a character who does not smile enough and is stronger and more leader-like than the other popular male superheroes. Danvers in the movie is presented as almost a ‘stoic’ character who continues to break the gender stereotypes. Her absolute nonchalance towards a cat while a male character Nick Fury starts baby-talking is one such instance. Her friendship with Maria Rambeau, a fellow Air Force officer is an unconventional depiction therefore challenging the myth about ‘female friendships’. Also, none of the other female superheroes had portrayed such a relationship. Captain Marvel is also one of the rare depictions as the major universes do not bind her to any gender role or unnecessary romantic associations.

The character of Scarlet Witch or Wanda created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby first appeared in ‘The X-Men’ #4 in 1964. Initially sketched as a supervillain along with her twin mutant brother Quick Silver, Wanda is regarded as one of the most powerful superheroes in the MCU. With the ability to alter reality, Scarlet Witch was initially a calm and submissive portrait. However, her then attire comprising only a bathing suit with straps, short boots, a leotard, opera gloves and a cape all in vibrant red again is a sexualised depiction. She was thus sketched as a product of male fantasy-submissive yet sexually emancipated. Both Lee and later Roy Thomas wanted Wanda to be at the very centre of male attention, both for her fellow team-mates and the male readers whereas the concentric and interlinked romantic associations were written to attract women readers. The word ‘witch’ in her name was probably not just for her super-powers of a sorceress but also for her seductive capabilities. However, the later additions to the narrative and the movie and animated adaptations reflect a drastic change in the portrayal of the character. The recent depiction in the MCU movies



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shows Scarlet Witch, played by Elizabeth Olsen, in a jumpsuit and coat thus renouncing the comic outfit entirely. Represented in the films as a young adult, tutored by the male avengers like Captain America and Hawkeye, who in the graphic novels were shown as her romantic interest. While the graphic novels keep Wanda imprisoned in the patriarchal panopticon, her identity oscillating between a ‘seductress’ and a wife-and-mother; the movies liberate her, focusing on her immense strength and practicality.

The female superhero has probably been one of the most efficient catalysts in the attempt to engender the gendered corners of literature as well as their popular adaptations. Having a broader spectrum and a greater reader-and-audience mass, the female superhero, despite the frequent patriarchal intrusions, has managed to transgress and hence transcend the rigid boundaries of ‘gender’.

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# Feminising the Body and Institutionalising Gender through Smartphone Applications

Aaheli Sen

The 1970s can be considered as a major paradigm shift in the discipline of Geography when branches of humanistic geography, radical geography and subsequent postcolonial, modern and structural geography were making their advent. Around this time gender was being highly foregrounded in the discipline. The question that is raised is how gender and geography can make allies and stem off as a branch of study from this discipline. The answer has been rightly put forward by eminent Indian gender geographer Saraswati Raju in her book ‘Gendered Geographies’ where she conveys the aspects of spatiality in the gendered existence of being, that is to say how particularities of space, place and landscape bear different meanings and are experienced differently by men and women. In the inception years gender geography was highly influenced by works of welfare geography and made its contribution towards the analysis of gender inequality. But a major shift in discourse of gender geography was seen around 1990s. This new phase which Geraldine Pratt called the ‘feminist geographies of difference’ has brought to the forefront the gendered differences of both men, women, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexuals and the different connotations associated with their situatedness in different spatial arrangements. Highly influenced by cultural, post-structural, post-colonial,

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psychoanalytic, queer and critical race theories this branch of geography tried to explore the geographies of body, identity, imagination and politics encompassing a broader array of social and cultural theory signifying a distinctive cultural turn in the discipline. A major important aspect of this new phase was that it tried to analyse different spatial attributes through seeking knowledge from psychoanalytic theories, stressing more on humanistic approach. A crucial and significant turn during this time in the discipline was that much of the research was directed towards studying bodies as sites of power contestation and societal regulations. The prominence of the body as a subject of study could be traced back in the writings of Francois Poullain de la Barre (1673) and the seminal work of Wollstonecraft and Taylor Mill in the 18th and 19th century respectively. The emergence of the body as a subject came to prominence in the discipline of geography in the late 20th century when geographers tried to unravel the social, cultural and political negotiations manifested in the bodies. This period also coincided with the much prominent theory of 'biopolitics' introduced by French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, where he tries to see how life evolves out of different political strategies. This theory had a large impact on the discourse of body and gender. Even the discipline of Geography responded to such a discourse by incorporating similar strategies in emerging areas of research .

As a humanist and as a geographer dealing with gendered geographies, the idea of geographies of the body has always fascinated me. When Foucault talks about 'governmentality', he talks about the methods and techniques used to govern the behaviour of human beings. This is simplified by Lemke who tells how Foucault uses the term governmentality to give a comprehensive and holistic idea about the forms of power and process of subjectification. Here 'government' does not simply talk about the administrative political

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exertions of power, but also the form of governing the self. In Foucault's word the concept of governing or government could be analogous to the concept of conduct which could range through a wide range of spectrum including 'conducting the self to conducting others'. Borrowing from this 'idea of conduct' I delve into the new age governing of the self and the mind through the use of various smartphone Applications. I try to see particularly how the female body reacts and is governed through these applications that have penetrated our everyday life. I seek to know the mechanism and the pattern through which the body of a woman is governed and in the process how a woman conducts herself and the mind. More importantly, the question following the pattern is the need for such forms of 'conducted' behaviour. It is pertinent to ask how these Playstore Applications have created a space which has prepared the ground for governmentality to be exercised in the everyday life of a woman.

With the growing advent of Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest etc. there is a larger trend of clicking pictures and more so of uploading them. Selfie/Groupfie is the new millennial buzz word, where one, with the use of advanced technologies of smartphone clicks a picture of the self. But it does not stop here. The picture is then uploaded in social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and other such platforms. Clicking selfies is such a rising trend that in 2013 the Oxford dictionary named it the 'Word of the Year'. However, with the growing trend of taking selfies, it has also transgressed boundaries and has entered into an arena where lunatic, narcissistic expressions are surfaced. The act of taking selfies translates into a form of compulsive disorder where one is found to take several snaps in a single day or perhaps a single hour. The American Psychiatric Association has come up with a word *selfitis* which refers to an obsessive compulsive disorder. This compulsive disorder is often

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directed towards one particular ‘perfect’ shot which satisfies the narcissistic mind and ego. There are different ways a photograph is captured but this disorder can be recognised best in solo-selfies where the sole focus is upon a single subject. This trend is mostly seen among the youth where the act of creating a self-image and preserving it is of utmost importance. The key element however is ‘perfection’. Through this arduous task of clicking multiple selfies one tries to achieve perfection and through this perfect state of projection one tries to achieve prominence in the virtual spaces of Facebook or Instagram. No space can be seen as a mere container of things or phenomena. It should be perceived as a complex whole with intersections of human activity and social structure. As Gillian Rose points out , spaces are inhabited and experienced through human instincts, desire and imagination. This is almost similar to what Soja talks about when he says that spaces are constituted by humans and are socially produced. Likewise the virtual space can be perceived in the same light. It is something that doesn’t have an absolute entity or existence but is lived in through human interactions and emotions. The role of human agency is of utmost importance here and the sense of perception plays an important role. Virtual spaces like Facebook/Instagram are acted upon and produced everyday through our daily activities and channelized through our lives. Lefebvre’s work *Production of Spaces* also expresses a similar line of thought where he puts forward the argument that spaces are not abstract containers but contains traces of processes that operate in them, subsequently produced and acted upon by a complex interplay of material and cognitive processes.

The production of selfie talks at large about the processes that govern its production. The primary aim of a selfie is to attain perfection and thereafter prominence and this is best mediated by a certain set of applications which govern or conduct the way a selfie should be

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taken. The question I explicitly try to raise is how governmentality is imposed upon the female body through mediators like these applications who try to define a sense of beauty on its own. The question seems a little bizarre in the first place but if one sees it clearly and tries to investigate then there are numerous ‘beauty’ enhancing applications and it becomes important to investigate the reasons behind the existence and use of such applications. For instance there are applications like ‘Beauty Plus’, ‘B612-Beauty and Filter Camera’, ‘Beauty Camera-Selfie Camera & Photo Editor’, ‘Face Makeup Camera & Beauty Photo Makeup Editor’, ‘Beauty Plus Smooth Camera’etc. which serve as mediators or catalytic agents in governing the female body. If one looks at the icons of these applications or the advertisements, they try to pass on the message of moulding (governing) or recreating a female face in the light of conventional beauty. Also if we stress upon the pattern of nomenclature of these applications they mostly revolve around words like beauty, make-up, filter, edit etc. These applications also have certain editing tools like ‘face correction’, ‘perfect eye’, ‘slimmer waist’ etc. which nonchalantly motivate and act as governing agents especially towards the female body through their interventions in the daily life.

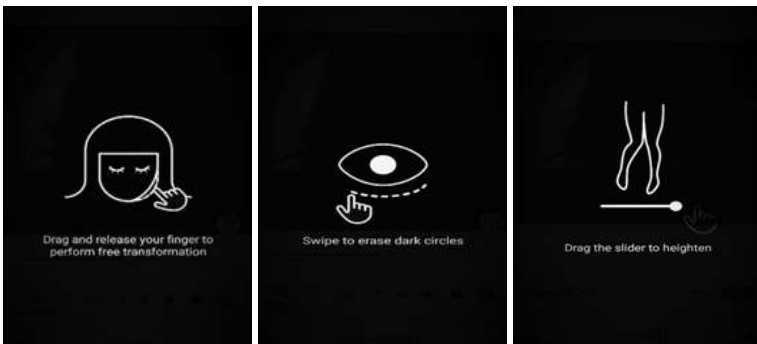


Plate. 1 Editing tools to enhance beauty in ‘Beauty Plus Me App’

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Since the ultimate aim is to attain perfection through satisfying one's narcissistic ego, one builds an image by submitting oneself to these propaganda perpetuated and mediated through these applications. The female bodies thus become a site of political and commercial exploitation and at the end the selfie that is being produced creates a distance between the subject and the object. This can be explained through Heidegger's existential phenomenology which talks about how things are represented in the manner in which they are perceived rather than what they actually are. Thus the very essence of existence of a woman in the digital space is the way she is being represented and thereafter perceived. Therefore it can also be inferred that the female body acts as a site of governing processes resulting in the creation of particularised gendered identities, expressed through bodily actions and perceptions.

The point of contention lies here that is it solely the commercial virtual space that exercises power on female bodies and is it that women are mere passive agents. The production of everyday life alienated self is a result of the governmental practices imposed upon a female body mediated and guided by certain virtual spaces but they cannot be considered as absolute agents working in the process. In the earlier paragraphs it has been stated that taking a selfie and alienating oneself to create an image also fulfils the narcissistic instincts and desires of the mind. Women cannot be reflected solely as passive adaptors of the process. The editing tools and applications and projecting the 'best self' on social media is definitive of its role. It can be regarded as a dominant game player and subordinating to this is the role of a woman who consistently fuels the entire process of governmentality by allowing the body to be a site of power play between politics and power.

The process noted above can be best explained by the psychoanalytic concept of 'abjection' put forward by Bulgarian-French philosopher

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and literary critic Julia Kristeva. *The Powers of Horror-An Essay on Abjection*, written by Kristeva in the 1980, talks about the art of abjection. Borrowing from psychoanalytic theories it talks about what an abject is. In simpler terms an abject is neither a subject nor an object. If it is at all anything then it is something which opposes and challenges the object. The abject is that entity which is created by the self and it disrupts the conduct of law or governing. It is something that lies between the one that is governed and the governed self. An entity which is ambiguous and does not conform to any particularistic order. The creation of an abjected self occurs every time one processes a selfie by employing the editing tools to further reshape it and finally culminating into an object. The first encounter with the selfie camera produces an ephemeral state of abjection. A site of horror. This becomes a point of contention, an opposing entity to the object that is to be recreated by using the editing apparatus in the applications. The female body becomes a site of everyday negotiation between the abject and the object. The projection of the abjected self on social media sites has its roots in the violent attacks and subordination and ultimately marginalizing the abjected self which gets repressed since it disavows any form of governmental practice. Kristeva also make us look at the narcissistic side of the subject. The repressive state of the abject is grounded in the desires and wants of the subject and from this what she calls 'the narcissistic crisis' the object is formed. Likewise, analogous to this is the narcissistic mind of a woman, who is horrified at the first glance of the self in the selfie. This horror, accompanied with desire, want and fulfilment give away the abjected self to create the object, and in this process a woman is not simply a receptor, but also acts as an active agent who complies with a pre-conceived notion of beauty standardised by the society. The body space of a woman is being reiterated to reinforce gender in its most invigorating forms. It



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becomes noteworthy that both the applications' editing apparatus and the woman is subsumed into this process.

The question here is that why do women subsume or labour themselves in this process of objectification. Why does the abjected self acts as a site of horror and why does it need to be repressed and violently attacked upon. It also raises question about why women give scope to these editing tools and applications to govern them by creating certain stipulated gendered identities that are manifested through their bodies. In this regard it becomes very important to study the concept of gender as a performative act. This idea that gender is a performative act was put forward by Judith Butler who argues that gender is performative in the sense that gender is being produced and reproduced every time through certain performative actions. When she talks about gender as a performative act she claims that a self becomes gendered through the performance of certain behaviour or following a code of conduct that gives society an impression of being a man or a woman. There are certain societal laws that stylise the body to perform gender. Nobody is born with a gender but it is rather infused through certain practices and norms. Gender is institutionalised rather than being a natural phenomenon. This can be supported with the Beauvoirian argument which states that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. A female child is reproduced as a woman by institutionalising certain societal practices. Beauvoir points out that when a girl child enters puberty it becomes an entry point to her future and the future starts to create a place in her body. A girl is made to represent herself as a woman from this stage and all the social customs and norms govern her to alienate herself to build an image of her own. Beauvoir also makes it a point that society is fitted with patriarchal lenses, that is to say that society perceives a woman through the eyes of a man. She also argues that women are also made to perceive themselves through patriarchal

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lenses. And in the process a part of her own narcissistic mind gets satisfied. There happens to be a prevalent dualistic mind which works towards satisfying both the narcissistic self and the male gaze. By alienating oneself into an object the woman is trained to achieve a sense of accomplishment and acceptance to best suit the patriarchal order of the society. The social media sites are spaces which are lived in the daily lives and they have also become a platform to showcase the objectified self. The editing tools and applications govern and aid the mind of a woman and transcend into bodily actions which help to situate herself as an object and more so as a feminine entity. Taking selfies with a particular camera angle and focussing on certain contours of the face are nothing but governmental practices imposed upon a woman's body and the woman here is an active agent who coherently subsumes to the idea of beauty institutionalised by the patriarchal society.

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# Shakuntala and Satyawati: Transcending Gender Roles

Paromita Chakrabarti

Social norms and religious values have been drawn from epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, several Puranas and myriad mythologies. Gender roles and rules around sexuality have been derived, regenerated and illustrated to exemplify valour, loyalty and duty. Women are depicted as docile, virtuous, submissive, paragons of patience and sacrifice. They have been made appendages, second fiddle with no significant role or as a woman ensnared in a ploy or a seductress. Simon de Beauvoir says that honour, shame, modesty, decorum, submission and sacrifice are all qualities ingrained into the feminine psyche since childhood. She is conditioned to suppress her voice into submission and silence. She is ordained to be presser and carrier of culture and tradition in patriarchal culture. She says that women in mythologies are the elementary silence of truth. Female characters have not been given the scope to speak in literature because they might expose the unpleasant truth of the society(Beauvoir). Mahabharata is a defining cultural narrative in the construction of feminine and masculine gender roles in ancient India and its telling and retellings have shaped Indian gender and social norms ever since. (Brodbeck)

Mahabharata and Ramayana these epics were written by men in the setting of a patriarchal society. Brahmans pertaining to the upper stratum of the society interpreted them to safeguard their vested interests. Women and shudras were classified to the same category and were debarred from reading and hearing religious scriptures. Therefore gender roles for women were defined by the dominant patriarchy.

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Shakuntala is portrayed in Mahabharata as the illegitimate daughter of Menaka, a courtesan and sage Viswamitra. Deserted by her mother she was raised in the family of her foster father sage Kanva. The story is of a love affair between Shakuntala and King Dushyant, their marriage and the subsequent acknowledgement by the king of the son fathered by him. The epic explicitly narrates how the king got allured by the buxom damsel and her shapely limbs. But, when she went to meet her husband at the palace court after living with her son for six long years, the king was completely oblivious of her entity and existence. She went with her son whom she had conceived out of her Gandharva marriage (one of the eight types of marriages prevalent in Vedic age). Her approach was brimming with optimism. She confronted Dushyant and urged for the consecration of their son in acknowledgement as his heir. (Rustomji)

Dushyant cast a sheep's eye at her and not only disowned his son but also made disparaging remarks about her birth and worth. Shakuntala retorted, arguing with credence and acidity. Never did she shed tears for a moment. Mahabharata portrays her fearless and indomitable even after her humiliation. Neither was she depicted as a coy lass when she mingled with the king before. The author of Mahabharata credits her for being a woman, applying her faculty of independence, condemning her husband for his irrationality and insensitivity. Finally a divine prophecy united her with Dushyant by declaring that the son was his (Thapar). The glances made by a mortified Shakuntala seemed to burn Dushyant. She is conscious of the dignity of virtue and was bold in voicing that a wife was the source of dharma, artha, kama and means of salvation (Shodhganga, Infilibnet). Later when he accepted his wife and stated that the alliance between them was unknown to his subjects and thus his arguments were only to ensure that his subjects do not assume he had a bond with her because she was a woman and had chosen the son for his kingdom. The harsh words used by his wife only professed her love for him (Thapar). This is evident here that this lady was independent, fought alone, undaunted and vocal to assert the right for

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her son. She had elicited a pledge from Dushyant during the course of Gandharva marriage that their son from this union should become the king's successor. She is extremely forthright and therefore obtained an undertaking from the king. Also, it required a lot of fortitude for a woman to live with her offspring who was yet to receive paternal recognition.

Millions of years later Kalidasa wrote the play 'Abhijnanashakuntalam', the version was slightly altered and we find in his portrayal the element of drama. He shows the realm of romance, imminent tragedy and finally happiness. The character was a contrast to the character depicted in the original epic. Kalidasa brought the episode of sage Durvasa, his curse and the signet ring to in aid of his portrayal of Shakuntala as an epitome of a virtuous and righteous woman. She was innocent, meek, submissive and the embodiment of pain and hardship, representing quintessential femininity and Dushyant, an archetypal man. She was pregnant, conscious of the social stigma, in search of her husband and led a sheltered life in the company of her foster parents and close companions. Kalidasa belonged to the Gupta era where the status of women had degenerated owing to deep rooted patriarchy. Therefore a self-reliant woman as depicted in the Mahabharata was transformed into a romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the play (Thapar).

Another powerful woman portrayed in the same epic is queen Satyawati. She was not born in a royal family, and was the daughter of the chieftain of a fisherman. Her ambition was reflected when she took time to ponder about the proposal of sage Parasara who felt sexually attracted to her (Adi Parva). Without being overpowered she resisted his advances with her wit. She made a solemn appeal of giving her boons. She loathed his beastly ardor and focused his attention towards her repugnant body odour. She wittily secured the boon of a fragrant body and unimpaired virginity because the sage entreated her for sexual proximity (Adi Parva). She impelled the sage to shroud a screen of mist elaborating on how coitus in the wide daylight violates the ethics and results in loss of honour and

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reputation for a man. Being a pragmatic girl she knew that Parashar would not marry her and therefore she could regain her virginity and a son like the sage. Post this incident none of them kindled a romantic hope to meet again and neither had she shown any sign of guilt nor trite emotions. After this union Satyavati gave birth to her son named Ved Vyas, the author of the epic (Bhattacharya). Several years later she married king Shantanu of Hastinapur who had wooed her for matrimony. In the beginning her father was reluctant to give her hand in matrimony but later gave his consent on the condition that the offspring of his daughter, born from this wedding should be the approved successor to the throne. The king concurred and Bheesma (the king's son from the previous matrimony) took the oath of celibacy (Ganguly). It is discerned that both Shakuntala and Satyavati married on their terms on being assured that their sons would become the king. Satyavati became the queen and handled the affairs of the kingdom after Shantanu's demise with her step son Bheesma acting as the advisor. She bore two sons from the king but tragedy struck when they died leaving their wives without children. Low caste birth never impeded Satyavati from bringing her son Vyas to the forefront and she commanded him to beget an heir to the throne through the custom of Niyog or levirate. She did not take into consideration Bheesma's plea to wait for a year. It was her independent decision as she felt that a kingdom without a king would be characterized by conflict and disorder. (Bhawalkar)

Devi Bhagvat Purana tells that Vyasa was reluctant to beget sons for the wives of his step brother by pointing out that only at the instance of a husband Niyog was permissible for a widow. Satyavati urged him to do so because she was keen to save the lineage. (Bhattacharya) Thus the Kuru lineage was superseded by Nishad race diffused through the queen and her son.

There are several other instances in Mahabharata alone where the characters challenged and contradicted the expected gender roles. Arjuna, the great warrior prince, cross - dressed and transformed

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himself for a period as a transvestite and taught dance to a princess. The pain of carrying a fetus for a long period propelled Gandhari to deliver artificially showing no concern for the patriarchal injunction (Brodbeck and Black). A glimpse through the pages of Mahabharata will reveal a Brahmanical or upper caste and patriarchal society, where fighting was deemed a trait well suited for the males. (Bhattacharya)

The Mahabharata demonstrates how even the entrenched gender and caste hierarchies of the age of the epics could be challenged by women who displayed the spirit of independence and stood up for their self-esteem. Through their bids to assert the rights of their sons, both Shakuntala and Satyawati exercised the power of their wombs to influence the course of dynastic destinies. In the process, they transcended their roles as mere objects of male lust.

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# The Woman as Other: Analysing Complex Gendered Narratives in *Ramacharitmanas*

Nidhi Shukla

This research uses *bhakti* as an interrogative tool to analyse the modalities through which the Other is constructed in *Ramcharitmanas*, Tulsidas's sixteenth century retelling of Ramayana. The Other as this research studies is the female self who when transgressive of the social norms is chastised. It argues how the discursive field of *bhakti* is defined only by ceaseless and unquestioning devotion to the Lord and dissent is abruptly stamped out. In the text underpinned by *bhakti*, the devotees are not difficult to locate. It is an eclectic mix including Gods, humans and other sub human creatures like monkeys, vultures and demons. In contradistinction to this, the dissenters or the Other as studied in the paper include Sati, the Consort of Shiva and Surpanakha, sister of the mighty demon king Ravana. The latter two are united in their fate of earning the opprobrium of either Ram or his devotees because of their reluctance to passively submit to the path of devotionism. A study of the asymmetries of gender in this text is intriguing considering the widespread receptiveness it enjoys among a major section of the North Indian population.

## **The Text as Heritage**

Among the multitudinous versions of the Ram *katha* tradition including Valmiki's Ramayana, Kamban's *Iramavataram*, Krittibasas's *Ramayana*, Eknath's *Bhavarth Ramayana*, etc

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Tulsidasa's *Ramcharitmanas* has received widespread receptiveness among a major section of the North Indian population. Such is the popularity of the text that its theatrical and performative aspect, the Ramlila tradition has been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of India by UNESCO. *Ramcharitmanas* is instrumental in creating a heritage of shared bonds, encompassing social customs, a sense of cohesion and identity which is transmitted intergenerationally. The aspirational character of the epic can be comprehended in the manner in which it has succeeded in circumscribing ideal roles and identities through its characters with the protagonist Ram of exemplary filial devotion, of Sita for wifely devotion, Lakshmana for brotherly affection and Ravana as the model enemy.

Composing the text in the sixteenth century, Tulsidasa drew upon the rich materials available from a vast variety of sources, which included not just Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Kamban's *Iramavataram* but from Vedas, Puranas like *Bhagvata Purana*, *Kurmapurana*, *Markandeya Purana Adhyatama Ramayana*, etc. *Ramcharitmanas* derives its authoritative status through the skilful manner in which Tulsidas uses vernacular as a medium for disseminating epic, masterfully weaving rich strands of both Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and *nirguna* and *saguna* forms of *bhakti*, as well as stressing on the oral performative aspect of the epic.

Right from the beginning of the epic he decries any lyrical skill preferring simplistic Hindi over the more ornate Sanskrit. This vernacular rendition of the text helped in gaining widespread acceptance from various sections of the society. Imbued with Tulsi's ethical and moral sensibilities the readers are informed right from the beginning of the epic the divine status of Rama and the boons and curses precipitate into the birth of Ram as reliever of the sufferings of his devotees.

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Reaffirming the readers of Rama's divinity, establishing Him as the supreme Lord of the Universe administered by Shiva, Brahma and thousands of other deities as well as articulating the benefits of incantation of Rama's name, Tulsī focused on the oral recitation of the epic. As a result daily recitals are arranged in temples, ghats, religious complexes in UP till this day. Philip Lutgendorf in his seminal text reflects upon the milieu of the contemporary performance of the *Ramcharitmanas* as an essential oratorical tradition. Ramlila, one of the most popular dramatic traditions is performed by a number of actors, musicians spanning from 9-30 days culminating with the death of Ravana on Vijayadashami, the tenth day of the auspicious Dusshera festival. All the above factors have thus restored the heritage value of *Ramcharitmanas* and its pre-eminent position as a living tradition, playing an essential role in the cultural lives of a large section of the population in North India.

### **Examining the nature of bhakti, devotee and the Other**

The word *bhakti* has its roots in the Sanskrit word *bhaj* which means to “partake, divide, share.” The word has been appropriated by authors, poets and lyricists like Vyas, Caitanya, Ramanuja, Sandilya, etc to articulate their visions and sensibilities. Tulsī defines the term *bhakti* as having ceaseless devotion to Ram's lotus feet, a complete dependence upon him and regarding him as the only source of help and happiness. The relationship between Lord and his devotee is akin to a master and servant and willing submission to Ram as an essential precondition to it. The Lord then assumes the role of a benevolent patriarch who protects his devotee from the clutches of *maya* or illusion. The redemptive nature of Ram is impressed upon the reader when, “Even the most horrible of sinners and culprits are forgiven by the Lord when they come and submit themselves with humility and devotion before the Lord.”<sup>1</sup> Tulsī also issues a stark warning about

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<sup>1</sup>Goswami Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 2001, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, Book 2, 2-3, pg 605

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Ram's terrible wrath when his "devotees are harmed...thousands of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh were incapable of protecting one who is inimical to Rama."<sup>2</sup>

In a text underpinned by *bhakti*, the devotees are not difficult to locate. The list of devotees is an eclectic mix including Gods, humans, sub human creatures like monkeys, vultures, demons, etc. As studied earlier, Shiva, lord of the Universe, adored by saints, gods and sages is the foremost devotee of Ram. Hanuman the monkey chief of Sugriva is the peerless devotee of Ram whose unflinchingly loyalty was recognized by Gods and saints alike. Bharata, Ram's younger brother made one of the most striking requests of demanding neither "Dharma (scriptural sanctioned path of righteousness), nor Artha (material prosperity), nor Kaam (erotic or sensual desires), nor Moksha (spiritual salvation) but undiluted love and devotion for the holy feet of Rama for all generations to come and all future births."<sup>3</sup> Even Ravana is portrayed as a devotee who through his penance desired to be killed at the hands of a human and on hearing Surpanakha's lament about the killing of Khara and Dhushan realized it was "Lord himself, the reliever of Earth's burden who had appeared on Earth"<sup>4</sup> and resolved to "attain salvation from the mundane existence by challenging him."

In contradistinction to this, the dissenters or the Other as illustrated in the epic include Sati, the Consort of Shiva, and Surpanakha, sister of the demon Ravana. Both are united in their fate of earning the opprobrium of either Ram or his devotees because of their reluctance to passively submit to the path of devotionism. This led to both Sati and Surpanakha suffer the ignominy of renunciation and public humiliation. The asymmetry of gender is hard to ignore as both

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, V, no. 23, pg 769

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, II, 204, pg 545

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, II, 1-4, 681

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women were doomed to disgrace which is preserved through posterity.

**The renunciation of Sati:** Narrated in the first book of the epic, Tulsidas writes on returning from sage Agastya's hermitage during the *treta yuga*, Shiva found Ram wandering desolately in the Dandaka forest looking for his wife Sita who was abducted by the demon Ravana. On seeing Ram's visage, Shiva exclaimed, "Glory to the Redeemer of the Universe who is all Truth, Consciousness and Bliss."<sup>5</sup> Sati, His Divine Consort beholding Shiva in that stage wondered why did he make obeisance to a prince and "whether Eternal who is beyond *maya*, and whom the Vedas cannot comprehend wander in search of his consort like an ignorant man."<sup>6</sup> Realizing Sati's doubts and gently admonishing her for her skeptical feminine nature, Shiva instructed Sati to verify her doubts. Assuming the form of Sita, she moved along the same path as Ram was passing. Rama on realizing Sati's deception enquired of her whereabouts and that of Shiva and wondered what made her roam alone in the forest.

Dejected by the turn of the circumstances, Sati returned to Kailasa and concealed the truth from Shiva. Shiva realized his devotion to Ram would be tainted and it would be indecorous on his part to have any conjugal relations with Sati, thereby renouncing her for a period of 87000 years after she tested Ram's divinity in such a blatant manner (despite having reassured her of the contrary). The moment he made this decision a voice from heaven exclaimed, "Glory to Shiva who has so staunchly upheld the cause of Devotion, Who else than You can take such a vow? You are a devotee of Sri Rama and all powerful Lord at the same time."<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture Tulsi brings in an episode from *Markandya Purana*

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, I, No.49, 1-4, pg 61

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, I, No 49, 1-4, pg 62

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, I, No. 52, pg 66

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of Sati's immolation at Daksha, her father's house to drive home the point how desirous of shedding the identity so renounced by Shiva, she immolated herself. Her dying words were, "Whenever you hear a saint, Sambhu or Vishnu being vilified, the rule is that if it lies within your power, you should tear out the tongue or run away closing your ears."<sup>8</sup>

The chilling manner in which Tulsidas wove the two episodes together, the first of Sati's doubts regarding Ram's divinity causing it to be a motivating factor for her immolation speaks volumes of the way Other is treated. The path to *bhakti* required ceaseless and willing submission to Ram. Any deviation from that was regarded as a deterrent and the Other subsequently punished. In this particular instance, Sati refused to recognize Ram's mystical status whereby she had to suffer public disgrace for it. On the other hand, Shiva deliberately pursuing the path of *bhakti* and devoting himself to Rama at the cost of renouncing his wife was blessed as a devotee par excellence. Thereby we see the route to devotionism had no place for ambiguity, misapprehension and skepticism.

**The Mutilation of Surpanakha:** The mutilation of Surpanakha is one of the most often cited episodes from the Ram katha tradition and has been studied from a number of perspectives. In this paper I explore how Surpanakha, the sister of demon Ravana, has been perceived as the Other by Tulsidas. Here we examine how she did not devote herself to Ram's lotus feet like Shabari but met him as an equal, openly propositioning him and declaring her love. We are all too well aware of how the particular episode ends yet it would be an interesting exercise to study it once again, this time from the prism of *bhakti*.

Surpanakha was smitten by Ram when she saw him spending his

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, I, No.63, 1-4, pg 74

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days in exile in Pancavati. Assuming the form of a charming woman she propositioned Rama saying, “There is no man like you and no woman like me. I have ransacked the three spheres but have found no suitable match for me in the whole universe.”<sup>9</sup> To this Ram casually remarked, “My brother is a bachelor.”<sup>10</sup> After ridiculing and taunting her for some time, Lakshmana at Ram’s behest cuts off her nose and ears.

It is indeed a gripping tale where instead of desiring a passive reception of Rama’s grace she asserted herself, proclaiming her love. Challenging Ram as a peer and not like a helpless devotee she is represented as the Other. There is a deep suspicion of her power and sexuality. What seems ironic is how Ravan’s lasciviousness was ignored by Tulsidas in his effort to portray him as a devotee whereas Surpankaha was punished for the same crime as she was the Other. As a result of her transgressions she was dishonored, derided and still serves as a perpetual reminder of the indignities lying in store for the dissenter.

### **Innately dangerous?**

Deeply disturbed with the degenerations emblematic with the Kali Yuga, Tulsidas penned apocalyptic passages evidencing the widespread moral and social decline. One of the most debilitating concerns were the unbridled freedom enjoyed by the women. Tulsi writes, “every man and woman taking delight in revolting against the Vedas, Sudras instructing twice born in spiritual wisdom and even arguing with the Brahmins, challenging them, “Are we in anyway inferior to you?”<sup>11</sup> Expounding further on the pernicious environment of the Dark Age he states how men would dance at the tune of their wives and the latter would desert their established and

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid, III, no. 5, 1-4, pg 670

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, III, no. 6, pg 670

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, VII, no. 96 (1-4). pg 1052

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handsome husbands, bestowing their hearts upon a paramour.<sup>12</sup> Women would have enormous appetites and treasure nothing other than their tresses, whereas widows adorn themselves in the latest trends.<sup>13</sup>

To remedy such colossal degeneration, Tulsi invites his readers to tread the path of bhakti which was the only way to escape the impurities of the Kali Yuga. Tulsi ardently exhorts his readers to willingly submit themselves to Rama. When Shabari, after paying obeisance to Rama asks, “How can I extol You, lowest of descent and dullest of wit as I am? A woman is the lowest of those who rank as the lowest of the low. Of women again I am the dullest headed.”<sup>14</sup> Replying to Sabari’s dilemma, Ram remarked, “Listen O good lady, I recognize no other kinship as that of devotion. Despite caste, kinship, lineage, piety, reputation, wealth, a man lacking in devotion is of no more worth than a cloud without water.”<sup>15</sup>

Characteristics of the Other is strewn all over the epic and the vocabulary tailored by Tulsidas is compelling. This detailed repertoire for the Other includes them being “dim witted”, “lustful”, “vindictive”, “fools”, and steeped in, “anger, arrogance, greed, vile of descent, self harming.”<sup>16</sup> They consciously ignore *bhakti* and try to swim across the ocean without any vessel. Tulsi also trenchantly castigates the Other condemning them of, “wallowing in the basest pleasure of senses...throwing away the philosopher’s stone from the palm of the hands and take bits of glass in exchange for the same.”<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

A critical reading of the text thereby shows how the woman was always held suspect, her nature perennially considered impure and

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, VII, no 98 (A-B), pg 1053

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, VII, no 99 1-4, pg 1054

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, III, no 34, 1-4, pg 697

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, III, no. 34, 1-4, 697

<sup>16</sup>Ibid

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, VII, No 85, 1-4, pg 1045

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her capacity to achieve spiritual grace only when she willingly subordinates herself to the male devotee. Perhaps the most egregious is the statement which states,

“A drum, a rustic, a Sudra, a beast or a woman  
All these are fit for a beating”<sup>18</sup>

It would be an interesting exercise to study how in order to prevent a woman from being wayward, she deserves to be physically chastised. Strong criticisms of woman also include the eight evils which are inherent in woman as explained by Ravana and which include “recklessness, mendacity, fickleness, deceit, timidity, indiscretion, impurity and callousness”.<sup>19</sup>

Wifely virtues, responsibilities and even the categories of wives are subjects which the text deals with. Anasuya, wife of the sage Atri explains to Sita how a woman who treats her husband with disrespect even if he is “old, sick, dull-headed, blind, deaf, wrathful or most indigent shall suffer the torments in Hell”<sup>20</sup> The woman of the highest category does not dream of any man apart from her husband while the lowliest kind is doomed to be widowed as soon as she attains her youth if she is disloyal to her Lord. Such vexatious passages are difficult to explain and justify.

Similar snide and disparaging anecdotes can be found by a discerning reader and its relevance cannot be overstated. Given the remarkable impact and popularity the poem has on a wide spectrum of audience, study of the crucial issue of gender as addressed in the poem becomes essential. Situating the timeless poem within the threshold of contemporaneity when politics of Ram is being revived from Parliament to the streets, a nuanced reading of the gendered aspect is worth investigating. Such an analysis unpacks and problematises notions of the “ideal woman” who is glorified and deserving of spiritual grace when subservient and demonized when assertive.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, V, No. 59, 6, Pg 657

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, VI, Nos. 1-4, pg 811

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, III, No. 4(1-10), pg 534

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# How Ben Jonson moves from the Stage to the Page: An Introduction

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The 1616 Folio of Ben Jonson was called the “Works”. An anonymous critic humourously commented, “Ben’s plays are works when other works are plays” (Riggs 28). It was a new word that conferred a great degree of respectability to the playwright who seemed no less in stature than the classical writers. The Folio sets itself apart from the pamphlets and copies of texts which dominated the market of the time. The motto of the collection was borrowed from Horace and in translation goes thus, “I do not work so that the crowd may admire me: I am contented with a few readers’. Jonson’s scholarship gave birth to plays that were addressed to an erudite community. (Riggs 221) says that the *Works* follow a classical format and we find that the opening page contains the picture of Jonson crowned with laurels. One is left wondering about the use of the word ‘work’ as opposed to the term ‘play’ (HSS, IX, 13). Jonson consciously distanced himself from cheap theatre and the circumstances of production, whether print or performance. Jonson dedicates his plays, poems epigrams and masques to Universities at Oxford and Cambridge, to the Inns of Court, to the King, the nobility and those associated with established institutions in England. When we consider the Folio it is a collection and the ultimate stage of the various processes involved, of reading, writing, performing, seeing, printing and distributing. Eisenstein, in her book on printing speaks of the creation of a community of understanding and therefore, of Difference. In other words Jonson tries to create a persona that

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controls the performance and reception of his plays and spectacles. What is increasingly coming under scrutiny is the impact of a growing mercantilism on the development of what Joseph Lowenstein calls the ‘bibliographic ego’ (*Possessive Authorship* 34). In Renaissance England in the arena of cultural trade and publishing various kinds of practices were prevalent<sup>1</sup>. Many plays were written in response to commissions but others were written as extensions of acting in particular plays, as commemorations and in expectation of being noticed by the royalty or noblemen. So, in addition to a search for a patron, a playwright was also on the lookout for publishers. Jonson’s career and his footprint in the literary marketplace was more complex. Most authors began their careers by selling their plays to acting companies thereby forfeiting any claim to the modern day sense of copyright. However, some authors were known to be allowed, and even called upon for subsequent revisions to make lines more contemporary or popular. However, this did not confer ownership rights on the author who only owned his unique manuscript. But it did confer some rights to the acting company which had acquired the play. They could try to prevent the play from being performed by other acting companies. They could also exert the “possessiveness” (Loewenstein) to ensure that the manuscript was not copied by other individuals or companies without their permission.

Normally, the next step would be to sell the copy to a scrivener or a printer. However, we can see that in most plays the playwright was never seen as a separate entity but as another member of the acting company. For the author to assert independent existence and identity was outside any standard practice. Prior to the publication of the *Works* Jonson indirectly makes many disruptive statements which are apparently anti-theatrical and deliberately destroys the element of fiction as in the “Articles of Agreement” and the Induction in *Bartholomew Fair*. He tries to strike a deal between the members of

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the audience and the author so that the value of the opinion of each spectator is limited to the price paid for the seat in the theatre. Consequent upon the anxiety following two imprisonments for the controversy surrounding *Eastward Ho* and *The Isle of Dogs* Jonson tried to dismiss any recognition or comparison with topical issues and identifiable figures or contemporary events. Though I have been saying that the publication of Works in 1616 is a landmark event but earlier, in 1614 Jonson tries to enter the market as a negotiator and takes responsibility for the published views in the play.

Jonson had earlier made his presence felt as one who was appreciated as a writer of masques. He was paid handsomely for his creative efforts and this relation helped him to directly relate to his spectators and transform his identity from an owner to a negotiator. However, we may work backwards to his writings dating from the 1590s to locate his dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the state of things. He was writing for Peter Henslowe's Admiral's Men in that decade and was sent to jail thrice. Most of this work was excluded from the Folio. He wanted to escape collaborations and incidents like the War of Theatres with Marston and Dekker. Jonson's "anti-theatrical prejudice"<sup>2</sup> is discussed in detail by Jonas Barish and the dramatist was repeatedly attacked for his mistrust of his spectators and fellow actors. Simultaneously the book trade began to thrive in the 1590s and at the turn of the century *Every Man Out of His Humour* was played before the royal audience. When revenue from such plays began to dwindle the companies were willing to forego their exclusive right to performance in exchange for money. Textual critics are of the opinion that such steps were meant to pre-empt the publication of corrupt texts. We know that prompt copies, actor's lines, audience copies and pirated versions used to be circulated. To stem the tide of a growing number of pirated copies Henslowe, for example, often paid to the stationers' court for exclusive rights to registration for publishing particular manuscripts, a phenomenon

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which was the equivalent of modern day copyright.

These moves bear testimony to the nature of unregulated activity current in the printing and publishing practice of the period. In her book on copyright<sup>3</sup> Annabel Patterson draws attention to the ways by which the theatre companies and the guild tried to regulate publication of manuscripts. Then there were issues of sedition laws, censorship by the royal court and some laws applied in an arbitrary manner. The guild and the stationers were constantly having to manage rivalry and dishonest practices among printers. Authors remained at the losing end of the spectrum occasionally receiving some money, more for their providing authentic manuscripts than as a reward for their creativity.

A reading of Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* confirms that Jonson was following the tradition of upholding the ethical and normative value of poetry, something that could be presented in a popular and marketable framework. Jonson had been repeatedly imprisoned for his compositions and was determined to circumvent the rules of censure and regulations by resorting to various strategies, patronage being an obvious one as in the composition of *Cynthia's Revels*. Jonson consciously included elements from public and private theatre to present himself as the poet who had shrugged off the memory of having been policed earlier and who was keen to make a respectable place for himself in the minds of the erudite and powerful. Lowenstein discusses how Jonson looked forward to occupy the space left empty when John Lyly's tenure as Master of Revels was not renewed<sup>4</sup>. *Cynthia's Revels* was written as an eulogy and the element of panegyric arguably interferes with the fictional status of the play. It is interesting to note that when we follow the trajectory of Jonson's career we see that from a dramatist of the public theatre he moves onto become a poet who has won the favour of patrons. The mock duel between Amorphous and Crites is analogous to a battle to establish the principles of courtiership as well

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as a movement from the anti-masques to the masques, from chaos to order, from supremacy of the patron to a desire for the independent and intellectual control of the poet. Jonson surreptitiously tries to inch upwards in the hierarchy of those who controlled the literary marketplace of print and performance at the turn of the century. In *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson is intent on establishing the controlling voice of the poet, a far cry from the negotiation in the extra dramatic devices used in *Bartholomew Fair*. However, on closer analysis we realize that it is the dramatist who has reduced the actors to negotiators.

As the play moves from the stage to the page<sup>5</sup>, a phrase I have borrowed for my title, the reduced importance of the players is concomitant with their claim to revenue in the marketplace. But the dramatic poet remains the chief recipient of the earnings though it is often tied to patronage. These have direct relation to the Poetomachia with Marston and Dekker and Jonson's quarrel with Inigo Jones which addressed ideas of abstraction, contemporaneity and proprietary control over the stage or page. The telling differentiation between the "plays" and "works" consequent upon the publication of the *Works* in 1616 points to the slow but steady movement towards commercialisation and control of the author over the written word. This birth of the idea of the copyright was enabled by William Stansby who was enterprising enough to gain control over all the printed texts attributed to Jonson. However, the word, 'works' is a throwback to classical antiquity and stresses the universality of artistic creation which transcends considerations of commercial success. Though anxious about the reception of his plays Jonson never betrays his apprehension about their commercial viability. He consciously cultivates the image of an artist who holds himself aloof from petty lure of the lucre. As late as 1709 the Statute of Anne came into force but almost a century earlier Jonson had shown the courage and foresight to try and stop the piracy and corruption of texts.

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Jonson is caught between two worlds – between the position of not wanting to commercially promote his compositions (as present in the poem addressed to the Bookseller in the Works) and seeking immunity from arbitrary laws. It is variously called a move for (re) invention) of the book (Newton) or as an “anti-theatrical” one (Barish).

Jonson was perhaps looking for an unchanging text, one that was not vulnerable to political, social, theatrical and cultural contingencies of the time. However, it is difficult to locate the changes from the scripts to quartos and various versions of the plays since most of it was ironed out into the grand and final version in the 1616 Folio. We get an idea of the changes when we study the quartos and Folio editions of Jonson’s plays. Newton suggests that Jonson was a self-conscious dramatist and was acutely aware of the permanence and “completeness” of his compositions. Jonson evolves in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. So Timothy Murray calls him the “author-as-editor” and textual critics are of the opinion that Jonson’s talent and genius remained unchanged despite the changing times<sup>6</sup>.

Friendship with William Camden, John Selden, Robert Cotton – erudite friends and his relationship with the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were instrumental in shaping his posture of the classicist who looked for a discerning audience but was nevertheless anxious about the reception of his plays. Evidence suggests that the Chamberlain’s Men who had the ownership of *Every Man Out of His Humour* was not at all keen to hand it over to any printer. The play was performed at court during Christmas but Jonson meticulously distances himself from any possible pirated versions of the play. The title page runs thus, “As it was First Composed by the Author B.J. Containing more than hath been Publicly spoken or Acted”. This claim to newer invention seems to provide him with the justification for printing the script as a book. Apart from piracy there was

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controversy surrounding the resale of an already sold manuscript. The performance ran into trouble when Queen Elizabeth was impersonated in the Globe after the banning of Satire in 1599 and Chamberlain's Men objected to successive prints of the quarto edition. Jonson appears to step away from his insistent role in the publication of the quarto edition but this desire is thinly veiled. Rather it betrays an anxiety about the reception of the text and the defamation of the author. Jonson swings between the success and monetary profit of what he presents before his spectators and the reputation he was trying to build before his readers. The spokesperson for Jonson tries to woo the audience but berates "Ignorance". After the end of the play there was another conclusion in the first performance but this was deleted subsequently. However, in the Folio there are two endings of the play, *Every Man Out of His Humour* – one for the court and another for the Globe theatre. Jonas Barish points out that Jonson seems to insinuate that the printed text would prevail over any temporal performance. Thus the world of illusion is subversively interrupted by portraits and choric commentary, dramatic theory and references to the form and content of the play. In doing so Jonson tries to establish the written page as unchanging compared to the fluidity and improvisations necessitated by the stage. This is not only a way to deny authority of the players but also to make himself visible in the book market of the time.

The establishment of a canon expressed a writerly self-consciousness and the use of printing house technology gives a physical unity and congruence to theatre scripts, poems and other writings and the promotion of the poet from an anonymous theatre company employee to a creative artist with agency and authorised selfhood- these were themes that were beginning to gain ground around that time. It was soon followed by Folio editions of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton. In the Folio Jonson fashions himself as a stable author who has agency over his work, an

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autonomous creator who is able to paint the picture of one who lays a definitive claim to social and professional reputation. Ben Jonson's *Folio* marked an important date in presenting an organized effort to exploit the technicalities of print in the English publication history. The directions given to performers are removed and the texts look less like scripts and more like reading texts. Jonson personally oversaw the type composition and printing of his volume with unparalleled meticulousness and perseverance. The "works" of Ben Jonson is thus the first example of "possessive"<sup>7</sup> authorship of a proprietary interest that draws attention to the growing consumerism of the times. It is seen by others as legitimization of the text by the author, the controlling presence which gives greater authority to oversee the minutest aspects of production of the book. Jonson therefore seizes on the turn of events to empower himself and gain ascendancy in the minds of his theatre goers and readers. From 1612 onwards many events point to the planning of Jonson that ultimately culminated in the publication of the *Folio* in 1616. Textual critics are of the opinion that William Stansby was working on the composition from the autumn of 1615. This was also a period of great political turmoil and factionalism. There were the Howards, Robert Carr who later became the Earl of Somerset, the Queen, the Scots who were close to James, Pembroke, Southampton, Edgerton and numerous lords with their Protestant agenda. The upheavals at court affected the literary community in various ways. Chapman fell out of favour, Donne decided to return to the Church and many poets knowingly or unknowingly got embroiled in the political turmoil. Jonson however managed to steer clear of controversy at that point of time. The Pembroke family repeatedly rates mention directly or indirectly as in *The Forest*, in the *Epigrams*, in the dedication to *The Alchemist and in Catiline*.

It is interesting to note that in the panegyrics composed in praise of James and his reign are placed at the end of the *Folio* through the

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masques *Mercury Vindicated and The Golden Age Restored*. In *Mercury Vindicated* Jonson refers to the royal power which can create a utopia and reform his court. In *The Golden Age Restored* we see Jove reaching down to strike down the Iron Age and its followers and eulogize Jacobean justice. In a typical hyperbolic manner the masques apotheosizes James and his court and governance. When Jonson began compiling for the Folio he was not prepared for the onslaught of sudden political changes that happened between 1612 and 1616. He tries to feign that his works are untouched by the ebb and flow of political fortunes. However though, he tries to be diplomatic about previous patrons now fallen to disgrace or is silent about earlier relationships<sup>8</sup>. By contrast, in the dedication to *Epicoene* Jonson reiterates that there are no changes in the text, an insistence that perhaps stemmed from his nervousness surrounding the change in fortunes of Essex.

The main text of Jonson's plays were largely untouched by the winds of political change but the prefatory parts were often reconsidered or recast or carefully constructed so that Jonson remained in the safe zone. The intelligent contrivance of Jonson was to place the dedications in a timeless spectrum so that they seemed to be beyond the vagaries of current political fortunes. Jonson preferred to treat the nobles as friends rather than patrons and addressed universities, courts and Inns of Court as institutions with which he had long standing relationships. Thus the poet appeared to be having free flowing relationships with individuals and organizations. However, the vocabulary of obligation does peep through in the dedication of *Poetaster* to Richard Martin and *Epicoene* to Francis Stewart and also to Camden, Pembroke Lady Wroth and Lord Aubigny, the dedicatee of *Sejanus* with whom Jonson was staying while he was overseeing the publication of the *Folio*. The dedication of the plays seems to be stressing the realm of personal loyalties but at heart there is a greater public stake at play. By cataloguing important names Jonson situates

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himself within a network of obligations but also tries to ensure a certain degree of independence and immunity. Some names may not be of faithful devotees but most belong to the close knit royal circle like Aubigny and Stewart had Scottish antecedents and this was reflective of the new inclinations of the patron. The Folio begins with dedications to Scots and ends with a masque depicting the Union of the two kingdoms. Jonson's apparent independence as a poet was always criss-crossed by professional rivalry. The power of print and emerging market place was in a huge tussle with the old economy and politics of patronage. There are dedications and eulogies but Jonson's voice as the author reigns supreme.

### Notes

1. Elizabeth Eisenstein discusses at length about the history of the printing press and how it was instrumental in changing the dynamics between the various stakeholders in the culture industry of England. She traces how the transition from manuscript to print impacted various aspects of the book trade.
2. It is often argued that the impression of Jonson being present to mould all aspects of a play, starting from its playing to reception, from writing to printing makes us aware of a polemic that is often directed against the theatre.
3. Patterson considers literature as a kind of discourse where the socio-political ethos became the watchdog sniffing at possible threats to monarchy. She argues that Jonson was consciously restrained but many innocuous statements point to covert dissent.
4. In *Responsive Readings* Loewenstein speaks of the aspirations of Jonson who sought a position of power and immunity from prosecutions.
5. Richard Burt discusses this transition in the light of Jonson the censored who later becomes the censor, and the vicissitudes of his career.
6. Murray discusses how print results in authorial constancy and its relationship to spectatorship and patronage.
7. Loewenstein speaks of how the advent of printing allowed for ownership of texts and made Jonson almost possessive about his compositions.

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