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Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

Aims

The Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935) derives its name from 'rup' (form) and 'katha' (words), which, when combined, mean 'myth' in Bengali. The journal gets its inspiration from the etymology and follows the principle that anything which has a form, visual, aural or mental could be studied from interdisciplinary perspectives. The journal seeks to promote criticism of emerging literature, innovation and art. One of its basic objectives is to promote interdisciplinary research for the study of the human condition, culture and the elimination of discrimination in a globally connected world.

- Aesthetic Studies: critical discussion, case study, computational analysis
- Animal Studies: Ethics, Aesthetics, Sports, Civilization and Biodiversity
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- Consciousness and Intelligence
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- Sci-Fi: the aesthetics of science, the science of aesthetics
- Scentific Philosophy: Artificial Intelligence, Biology, Economics, Neuroscience, and Psychology
- World History of Literature and Art
- World literatures and indigenous studies

Scope

The fundamental idea for interdisciplinarity derives from an evolutionary necessity; namely the need to confront and interpret complex systems. An entity that is studied can no longer be analyzed in terms of its singular objectivity but as a contending hierarchy of discourses emerging from multiple or variable branches of knowledge. We encourage authors to engage in inter political and intercultural discussion involving interdisciplinary perspectives from areas within and beyond humanities and the humanist sciences, wherever applicable. Authors must be first sure of the high value of their papers in their comparison to international standards and then submit their papers. Submission areas include but are not limited to the following.

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Stillness of star-less nights: Afghan Women's Poetry of Exile

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary English poetry by Afghan women presents a remarkable reading experience. Critical explorations, at ease with post-colonial conditions, minority solitude and feminist readings, have largely remained inimical to the unique, yet chequered history that women poets such as Zohra Saed, Sahar Muradi, Sara Hakeem, Fatana Jahangir Ahrary, Fevziye Rahzigar Barlas and Donia Gobar document in their works. Most of them write in their native Dari and Pushtun languages as well as in English and often their English compositions have smatterings of their native tongues. Even though individual experiences differ, these women delve into the collective memory of oppression, pain and unrest to give vent to their feelings, and seek to reach out a sorority of shared angst. This paper seeks to explore the complex cultural contexts which have given birth to Afghan women's poetry in exile.

[Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan, women, poetry, exile**]**

Afghanistan is one of the most impecunious nations of the world. War-ravaged, beleaguered, Afghanistan has been prone to invasion, internal revolts ever since the time of Alexander the Great. With a dozen major ethnic groups such as Baluch, Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Nuristani, Arab, Kirghiz, Pashai and Persian, the dominant notion of a singular identity has been provided by Islam, even though there are tiny Hindu, Sikh and Jewish communities in the country. From the early years of the nineteenth century till date, Afghanistan has witnessed not one, not two, but as many as three major colonizing powers – Russia, Britain and the United States of America, vying for supremacy. The intervention of the British Empire and Czarist Russia in the internal affairs of Afghanistan in the early years of the 1800s jeopardized a seething with insurgency. The two colonial powers engaged in a fiendish competition amongst themselves over control of land, power over indigenous states and a persistence in meddling in the affairs of the independent states, a contest that was euphemistically named 'The Great Game". However, in spite of the British interest in Afghan affairs, as an obvious corollary of substantiating its claim over the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan under the leadership of King Amanullah declared independence capitalising on the dramatic wave that witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the other rebellions that swept across Asia at that time. Amanullah's reign that started from 1923 initiated reforms in women's status in society and gradual improvement in their position in the familial structure. Needless to say, the reforms met with vociferous, often riotous, protests and ultimately led to the end of Amanullah's rule.

Another period that witnessed a concern for the deplorable condition of women in Afghanistan was

when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), backed by the Communists set off an agenda of social transformation that ultimately would have led to a progressive empowerment of women in Afghanistan. However, even this initiative received a setback due to the overthrow of the PDPA led government and the birth of the Mujahideen. Afghan women continued to be at the receiving end by being doubly oppressed by ruthless colonial powers, wars and political strife on one side and on the other - stringent, suffocating social strictures that were perpetrated by patriarchal fascists who cried down all pleas for women's basic human rights and privileges. Yet even today, traditional practices such as child marriage, giving away girls for dispute resolution, forced isolation in the home, exchange marriage and "honour" killings oppress and marginalize women. These discriminatory practices are enforced by the menfolk, including some religious leaders by invoking their own interpretation of Islam. In most cases, however, these practices are inconsistent with Sharia law as well as Afghan and international law, and needless to say, violate the human rights of women.

The gender-dynamics of a country that has been in the throes of colonial aggression by two of the major powers of the time – Britain and Russia, coupled with internal strife and forced dissemination of a cult-religion that noticeably veered away from the nobility of Islam in order to keep tabs on women, prevaricated any attempts for setting up of an egalitarian society amenable to women. From the 80s onwards, the United States started taking an active interest in the Islamic fundamentalists and fuelled Afghan unrest by offering militancy training and sponsoring weapon-support to the Mujahideen. However, the U.S.interest fizzled out with the collapse of the Soviets. Burhannuddin Rabbani, the chief of the Northern Alliance and the principal architect of the recent Taliban ouster from Kabul, ruled from 1992 to 1996, unleashing hitherto unheard misery on women. During his reign over 60,000 people were murdered and thousands of women were raped. A new Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Taliban, overhauled the governmental setup in Afghanistan in 1996 with active support of the neighbouring Pakistani Intelligence agencies. Born and nurtured in Islamic schools that had mushroomed within the portals of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, the Taliban sought to create a theocratic state based on their own interpretations of the Already severely repressed by the various Mujahideen warlords, the plight of Afghanistan's women reached an all-time apex. The veil became the law of the land, and women were forbidden from attending school or holding employment outside home,to leave the house without a male escort and were not allowed to seek medical help from a male doctor. Women, who were doctors and teachers before, suddenly were forced to become beggars and even prostitutes in order to feed their families. Following the September 11 World Trade Center bombings the United States accused Osama Bin Laden of the crime and demanded that the Taliban hand over Bin Laden. On their refusal to meet the U.S. demand, the Afghan United Front together with the United States attacked the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and forced them out of Kabul, but not before shoving the entire country into breathless summers of man-made drought and cruel winters of malnutrition and death. The restrictions on Afghan women

were officially withdrawn but even today, the abuse of women continue as the government is too weak to enforce many of the laws, especially in the rural areas, and in what were once Taliban-supported areas.1 The monolithic power of the Taliban and the Mujahideen has effectively homogenized the plurality of experiences of the masses. Therefore, the general consensus about the plight of the Afghan women irons out differences amongst women and the saga of Afghan women almost threatens to become a unilateral narrative. However, the poems of the expatriate women poets present a wide array of thematic preoccupations, starting from a grinding sense of rootlessness (Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens by Zohra Saed), lost love (Promise by Fatama Jehangir Ahrary),forced exile (Exile, or My father's elbow by Sahar Muradi) religious skepticism (Faith Lies in Worship by Sara Hakeem) and even eco-feminism (I am Nature by Fevziye Rahgozar Barlas).2 Though Afghanistan – the country of their origins feature in their poems, the responses vary-from a nostalgic yearning for an Edenic homeland to a vivid description of military excess that only evokes terror and revulsion. The poets try to reach out to the members of their extended families who have been scattered worldwide, and memory for them become as much a tool of oppression as of psychic healing. Sahar Muradi calls her memoirs that prefix her collection of poems 'A Bat is a Butterfly, or the Wonder of being Several'-the subtitle reminding one of the 'Anekanta' doctrine of Indian Jaina philosophy.3 In Dari, the language in which she learnt to articulate herself first, the compound 'leather butterfly' signifies 'bat' and Muradi finds her own unique position of an immigrant Afghan woman in America as appropriate to the term. Bats, beside being noted for extremely poor eyesight are also migrants, and physically weak and vulnerable- qualities that well may have gone to inspire self-nomenclature. Donia Gobar, a middle-aged medical practitioner, a poet and sculptor, romanticizes about the country of her birth, whereby Afghanistan is lovingly named Ariana, a derivative from the Persian word Aryan, and one of the most popular girl-names in Afghanistan. Inspite of the disruptions that taint the country of her dreams, Gobar retains a core of belief that Ariana, the helpless child, 'in cold broken houses/On sizzling country roads/ In dark alleys of glorious cities/ In hospital corridors' will yet survive. She endearingly wishes to hear Ariana's whispers,

I will never be gone . . .

I will never be gone . . .

I will never be gone . . . (Ariana)

In Fevziye Rahgozar Barlas, one comes across poems which she claims to be written 'for women in Afghanistan': poems such as My World, Waiting for a Miracle, I am Nature and I am Love. Daughter of the famous Afghan journalist, novelist and poet, M.Shafee Rahgozar, Fevziye's poems connect women to nature and inspite of occasional despair, her poems transcend the pervasive gloom and desolation that have come to be associated with women's condition across the world. By fusing the female self with the seasonal cycle in nature, Fevziye can put forth an assertion similar to the one rung in by Percy Shelley a couple of centuries earlier, 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

I am waiting for a miracle
Till the scent of the dried leaves
Sings the melody of rain
To the ears of the wind
I am waiting for a miracle
The green miracle of spring. (Waiting for a miracle)

In an interesting re-working of the Fanonian thesis, these Afghan-born U.S. based women poets have circumscribed the disciplinary regimen of their parent-country by taking up writing as acts of cultural self-definition, at a time when Taliban oppression had receded and emergent nationalist consciousness was making its presence felt, sometimes even in distant shores.4 It is important in this regard to understand that though they are displaced, both in space and time from the blood-curdling acts of torture that many of their unfortunate sisters had to suffer - sometimes the poets themselves had oppressive personal memories of air-strikes and acts of horror as in Zaheda Ghani's fictocritical work, Afghanistan – the main thrust of these women is a persuasive presentation of an authentic Afghan experience. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out,

specialness is expected of these subjects.5 The Western world wishes to dust aside the monotony of sameness and therefore these expatriates have to paint themselves 'thick with authenticity'. To the elitist reading world (primarily First World), the Afghan women poets in question are the brand ambassadors of the 'real' Afghanistan, and should oblige the modern sophisticated reading public with the 'truly different' experience rather dabbling in issues of hegemony, racism, feminism and social change, which again these women cannot avoid due to the current trend of using liberal discourse. Minh-ha correctly observes that the Japanese looks more Japanese in America than in Japan, and hence, any hint of inauthenticity with regard to representation of thoughts and experiences may be read as a loss of origins or a gross deviation from non-Western values and thoughts. This in turn engenders a crisis of a different order for the women, because of their concurrent locations in two worlds, one utterly and irretrievably lost, and the other, too dissimilar and distant to be assimilated with. This dilemma is maturely dealt with in Sahar Muradi's verse paragraph, Pushing, where the protagonist Shabnam, a young Americanized Afghan girl, practices aerobics, as all American teenagers do, while brushing past comments, concerns, images that juxtapose her mother's concern over Shabnam's supposed loss of virginity, TV shows that graphically depict human love-making, the 'madar' (sic) dutifully setting 'padar''s chai' (sic) on the coffee table and the girls' swim in the nearby lake wearing long t-shirts.

Shabnam is on the floor of our room, blooming brown globes out of her little
Black lycra top, and counting.Twentyfive, tewntysix, twenty seven in
Hot, heavy breaths . . .
Past the bathroom where madar is convinced the tampon absorbed her

Daughter's purity . . .past Olsen Middle School and the girls
Who didn't inherit two unwieldy worlds beneath their shirts or the skin of
Animals on their arms . . .

The poem also includes a reference to the typically Eastern practice of old-aged relatives, 'arriving with month-long suitcase from another son's house and a face full of sickness and complaint and judgment' at the Hollywood International Airport. The climactic point in this work is the father's sudden scornful outburst at the young girl, as if her skimpy casual workout-wear lacerates his composure and reveals the sullen patriarch ready to chastise women, even if it be his daughter, ostensibly because even in a new, liberated ambience, the young girl's actions are not beyond censure and her latent sexuality that has already defied the black veil for the black lycra top needs to be controlled. In another poem, Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens, Zohra Saed analyzes the tug of the roots for those people who had to flee away from their bleeding motherland to set up residence in the American shores, yet whose feet start tapping in glee when they watch pirated videotapes of Afghan singing sensation, Ahmad Zahir. The second generation of Afghan settlers, including the poet herself, can just watch in detached awe 'my mother and all seven aunts / danced in the living room./ In the next room,/The children were hypnotized / by Bugs Bunny'. The dance of the mother and the seven aunts to express their heartfelt joy is in stark contrast to the televised images of

musical videos of beautiful women
singing folk songs from Jalalabad
and Kandahar, decked in gold,
eyes swept with surma.
They keep their eyes averted
and carry themselves as if being arranged in a marriage
There is no dancing here
Most likely, it is their husbands who play
The tabla behind them
Strands of home dance through
Aisles of Pepsi and Heinz,
Chocolates and cigarettes.

It is apparent that a small part of Afghanistan has been imported in this downtown Asian settlement of Flushing in Queens, Manhattan, New York, but the original experience does not match the resultant performance in sheer joie de vivre. In an odd reversal, the expatriates enjoy more mental freedom as far as societal restrictions are concerned, whereas in the featured music videos, the 'beautiful women . . . decked in gold, swept with surma' can only avert visual contact, for their zealous, watchful husbands keep a tab on them, in music as well as in life. Dance, an art form that momentarily succeeds in

obliterating inhibitions of any kind is embraced by the immigrant women whereas the Afghan women singers, featured more publicly in music videos can only demurely sing without looking up and having any visual contact even with the camera, the eye of the public. Yet, the young, second generation Afghan settlers, here the poet – a young girl, can allow the shopkeeper's son to 'circle around me, pretending to rearrange layers of velvet prayer mats', an intimacy that is challenged in the very next line – 'he has spotted another exile'-an index of distance and displacement. The condition of double exile that the young poet experiences alienates her as much from her parent country-where she does not belong, as well as her surrogate-country, America, where she can never be naturalized and will always be designated in her special status of an exile.

The condition of being an exile is further grappled in the poem, Exile, or my father's elbow by Sahar Muradi, where the young daughter of an Afghan expatriate lowscale hotelier recounts how her father often loses himself in his storehouse of memories, even while his elbow is still placed on the counter-top. The split in his self-his mind in his motherland and just his elbow is in America unnerves the daughter, just as it does the mother who is busy in her newly nurtured culinary skills of preparing sandwiches, sub rolls, large or small salads, while at home she dishes out ladles of 'qorma challow' and chunks of 'chabli kabobs'. At home, amidst references to the white snaking pattern in the mountains of Mazar-i-Sharif that signified the spirit of Hazrat Ali and Zohake Mahran, the father educates his children on a staple diet of Afghan myths, a trove of knowledge he knew no one in America would care to learn. And then, unlike girls in Afghanistan, when his daughter goes to attend an American college, he requests her to photocopy old archived maps of Persia and Baluchistan, countries that had ceased to exist except in his dreams. The adamancy of the father in clinging to his roots is thrown into relief by his worldly-wise wife who wishes her husband to unlearn old, irrelevant dates and details of their Afghan past and instead nags,'Why don't you learn the prices?' In this poem that is significantly polyphonic, Sahar Muradi also includes a typically Western voice, that of Bob, who queries about father's elbow repeatedly, as if that is the only part of him that is visible in America, while the rest of him rests at peace in Afghanistan - the land of his dreams.

Every night he goes online, elbow on the desk, hand at his lips, glasses
Dripping down his nose, and reads the latest news.
You will wear down the skin, Bob teases. (Exile, or my father's elbow)

While the horrendous details of a strife-ridden country are deliberately eschewed in favour of a romantic, desirable motherland one has been constrained to quit, in Zaheda Ghani's work, Afghanistan, the crude journalistic precision with which every detail has been worked out calls for closer scrutiny. Part of a major work entitled Fragmentations, Ghani uses an avant garde form of fictocriticism beside using experimental language in this verse-paragraph. Following the New Journalism models of Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion, Ghani shares her memories of an actual air-strike that almost killed her school teacher

mother and etched a deep scar in her young mind about the life-threatening hazards of a nation being coerced to submission by external forces, in this case, the Soviets. This event was a decisive one in determining the course of the young girl's life, because the first thing the mother whispers to her daughter in a reassuring embrace after surviving the air-strike is 'We have / to get away from here.' Ghani grew up to be a journalist, engaged in her leisure in writing poetry and associating herself with women's charity group. In fact, she is the only poet who is settled not in U.S.A. but in Australia, countries differing in geographical location but not in offering refuge and peace to turbulence-hit souls like Ghani.

In The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse, Abdul R.Jan Mohammad talks about two terms: 'petrification' and 'catalepsy'- both situations of dilemmas faced by a colonized individual.6 If the individual decides to remain loyal to his native culture, he decides in favour of staying in a 'calcified' society. If on the other hand, he opts for assimilation, he runs the risk of being trapped in a form of 'historical catalepsy'. Jan Mohammed talks of the native losing his sense of historical direction as well as his initiative. Though Jan Mohammed has focused his attention on the African colonial situation, the ambit can be widened to include the predicament of the poets in discussion. These women, now ladies, have had to relinquish their native milieu in which possibly they would have remained nameless, expressionless, as thousands of their sisters and mothers were. The pain, of being thrust in an alien cultural climate as a consequence of displacement, had possibly been overcome, but not so the sympathy for the suffering sisters. They cannot afford to be calcified just for the sake of their existence, and neither can allow historical catalepsy for the sheer alienness of the two cultures. In keeping with Jan Mohammad's argument, these women in exile start nurturing ambivalence: she is attracted by the superior colonizing culture and repelled by the indigenous system that subjugates and humiliates her. And, this ambivalence often colours the religious predilections of these women as well. For instance, a mere schoolgirl of a poet – Sara Hakeem (All of fifteen years and a junior at Clements High School, Texas) in her poem Faith('s) Lies in Worship rues her absence of faith in religious observances, in this case, Muharram, and also thinks that the beat of drums fails to resonate with her heart beat. While the devout worshippers remain inconsolable mourning the untimely death of the martyrs, the young poet, conscious of her necessity to conform to her professed religion, remains skeptical of the loss. For her, the loss of the martyrs portend the loss of innocence, and tangentially, loss of 'free thought and individuality' because the religious pundits have already spelt out the emergent consequences of the catastrophe and precluded the possibility of any other interpretation. This kind of religious cynicism would have been strongly dealt with in her native country, Afghanistan and she could have easily hit the headlines for her ears/nose being chopped off or worse, beheaded. But, enjoying the immunity of a country like the U.S., she can and does wonder aloud –

I perpetuate the myth of belief
They perpetuate the myth of brand-name Worship

Which is the greater fault? (Faith('s) Lies in Worship)

The 'I' narrator is a second generation exile, who cannot align herself to the religion her parents profess and neither can have the courage to own another. The 'myth of belief'

she continues to carry along her therefore becomes a heavy , albeit meaningless baggage that she has to carry along. The 'myth of brand-name Worship' that 'they'- her parents/seniors adhere to so passionately is a symbol of the 'petrification' Jan Mohammed talks about. Interestingly, both these myths coexist in the young girl making her position as an exile even more problematic and vulnerable.

Afghanistan's economic marginalization, social disorder, and political dislocation may have led to large-scale emigration to conducive climes and countries, but there is no denying the fact that these women, uprooted from their native soil, are comfortably ensconced in their new homes. The pain of losing one's hope remains, the clamouring for a stable identity lingers in hearts stamped 'Exile' and the remembered memory of gender apartheid constantly haunts them. Their bodies become the sites of rape committed on their sisters back in Afghanistan – their souls cry out in pain with every act of transgression their Afghan women-friends suffer. Yet, standing on Brooklyn Bridge, the Afghan poet Zohra Saed, possibly the self-same girl 'born on Lailatul Qadr, holy night of Ramadaan' discerns how the coiled umbilical cord that had swallowed up the visions of the city of her birth had magically unfurled that gold-rimmed night and spread its fragrant fog all over the city of her exile, her new, safe haven of peace.

1977, Afghanistan: A girl born on Lailatul Qadr, holy night of Ramadaan
. . .Grandmothers tell the story of healing: how the wounds heal only after they
have memorized the moment of hurt. . .
April 1978: A revolution tangles ribs and spines with iron and steel
1998, New York City: When Lailatul Qadr comes again, she is over a bridge
between Brooklyn and Manhattan. While the night is threaded in gold, the lost
city in her navel
Unwinds itself from the swirls of skin and slips over this new city like a fog.'
(What the scar revealed)

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Rules of Language in Rules of the House: A Study of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's Tibetan English Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The displacement of Tibetans from their homeland has also displaced the Tibetan language and culture among the generation who are born or educated in exile. However, there are new languages and forms of expression acquired in exile that enable the Tibetans to negotiate their culture, identity, and aspirations. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, the first Tibetan woman poet in English to be published in the West, is one of the representative voices of exiled Tibetans. Her first book of poems Rules of the House was a finalist for the Asian American Literary Awards in 2003. This paper is a thematic study of the philosophical and social aspects of language in the poems from Rules of the House.

[Keywords: Tibet, Exile, Language, Deconstruction, Displacement.**]**

The new generation Tibetans1 in exile have just begun to articulate themselves using literary metaphors. Having inherited a ruptured identity from the history of their lost nation and living in the ambivalent post-modern times of globalization, the Tibetans-inexile have complex aspirations about their future. Exile that had meant a temporary arrangement for the elder generation has betrayed the hope of return to homeland in fifty long years of struggle, and the impasse of the Tibetan problem baffles the orientation of the new generation. Writing, as the Tibetan essayist and poet Bhuchung D. Sonam says, "serves as a primary pressure valve" to the contemporary Tibetan writers (72).

The acculturation in exile enables Tibetans with new languages, writings, and forms of expression, as much it disables to some extent the Tibetan identity of the past. In the social process of, what Stuart Hall calls, 'being' to 'becoming' of cultural identity through the corridors of past in land-locked Tibet to the present history of exile and diaspora (223-26), Tibetans are emerging with literature in English that addresses their complex modes of existence. Among the Tibetan English poets, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is a leading voice.

Dhompa's subject-position takes one to the history of her mother as much to the trajectory of the Tibetan community in exile. Her mother who had escaped to exile in 1959 was the daughter of a chieftain in eastern Tibet. She became the first woman member of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile. She gave birth to Dhompa on a train between Delhi to Chandigarh in 1969 as she was travelling to deliver her child in a hospital. Dhompa grew up in Nepal and India in the protection of parliamentarians and elderly monks, many of whom preserved their former reverence to their regional chieftains' descendants in exile. At the tender age of 24, Dhompa lost her single parent. Her mother was travelling from Delhi to Dharamsala to

attend the winter assembly meeting after being re-elected when she met with an accident. Her mother's death, ironically on the same route where Dhompa was born, has since been the pivot of her life. She was urged to join Tibetan politics in her mother's place by her elders, but she chose poetry over politics- her poetics of talking Tibet in one's everyday experience.

Dhompa studied in English boarding school at a hill station in Mussorie, graduated from Lady Sri Ram College in Delhi, followed by a Masters in Creative Writing from San Francisco. She has published three books of poems, Rules of the House (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2002), In the Absent Everyday (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2005) and My Rice Tastes like the Lake (Apogee Press, Berkeley 2011). Her non-fiction on Tibet Imagined Country is due for publication by Penguin India. She also wrote two chapbooks- In Writing the Names (Abacus, 2000) and Recurring Gestures (Tangram Press). Rules of the House (ROTH) is an anthology of seventy poems, written in free verse, rendered as micro-stories. The poems function at two levels. At one level, they are stories- silly stories of a boy falling down or exiled Tibetans fighting mosquitoes, grave stories of a city becoming ashes or news of accidents or a daughter looking for death, children's stories told at bed-time or in a garden. At another level, these are stories with profound themes of exile, loss, memory, identity, and womanhood. What brings out a web of connections and meanings in these poem-stories is a crafty use of language by the poet. Dhompa uses language in its deconstructive mode where meanings are deferred as soon they are made, and these meanings are linked to the ambivalent state of the Tibetan identity in exile. This paper is a contrapuntal study of the philosophical and social aspects of language in poems from ROTH.

The language in poems from ROTH invites attention to its character by the peculiar way of its usage. For example, in the poem 'She is', there is a threadbare image of words. Children observe the words carefully in the voice of M

We are tucked into bed and kissed
a fleeting one. Through the curtains, her voice loosens like thread
from an old blanket, row upon row. We watch her teeth in the
dark and read her words. She speaks in perfect order, facing where
the breeze can tug it toward canals stretching for sound (24)

In another poem 'Untitled Dance', the speaker foregrounds the elusive nature of language through a story about comprehension and incomprehension of certain traditions and gestures. The characters in the poem- M, S, and the speaker go out to watch a Lion Dance performed by Tibetan monks wearing masks. S, who belongs (in other poems such as 'On the way to the red city') to a different language tradition than that of M and the speaker, gets tired of trying to understand the dance. The speaker aids S's understanding by calling his attention to the way feet kick dust in the traditional lama dance: "You can unravel a complete story by the pressure of feet on shoes". As soon as the dance is over, the unmasked dancers are "themselves" and cannot be recognized. The speaker, perplexed with the shift in the focus from the

masked Lion Dance to unrecognizable unmasked dancers, tries to "settle for words" (86).

Language too is a performance, and a masked one at that, especially in different contexts of its usage. One may try to fix meanings of language in particular cultural traditions such as that of the traditional lama dance or even in the literary tradition of the scansion of metaphor, meter, or rhythm ("watch their feet kick dust"), but language will elude meaning in another tradition and another context. In the poem, 'In the event of change', one cannot understand the speaker through what s/he is saying because what s/he is saying cannot be situated in one moment

I am saying primroses lined the pathway of toothless hedges.

I am saying the ocean shimmered like corrugated steel in the morning sun.

The context of my story changes when you enter. Then I am dung on the wall of the nomad's field. Then the everyday waking person. (15)

In the poem 'Untitled dance', the speaker (in an attempt to settle for words) observes M rubbing her chin after S "tells her he is unable to find significance in /bowing before idols" and understands that M is angry. M and S are incompatible in their understanding of the significance of each other's traditional rituals, which triggers in the speaker an urge to understand the difficult system of language and the meanings that it carries. She turns to trees in the garden and tries to decipher the language of trees. She observes how trees "send their branches to lean in one /direction." She then listens to the gardener's interpretation: "The gardener says predictions are made by the self opting for aberrations". For the gardener, meanings exist in relation to his vocation and, therefore, "aberrations" or the wild growth remind him his vocation of maintaining the garden. There is an alterity in the gardener's interpretation of the language of trees that "send their branches to lean in one/direction" (86). In the power structure between the gardener and trees, meanings are made in favour of the powerful- the one who is interpreting the language- rather than the powerless object whose existence is being interpreted. Also, there is at play language structures of multiple cultures that we live by or adopt. In another poem, 'Saying it again', for example, the cook and the speaker, who speak different dialects, have varying interpretations of the same story that the cook narrates

A love story, I say. He says no, I wasn't paying attention to details.

It is a story about hunger. How it can change even a parrot. (89)

In yet another poem, 'On a way to the red city', the speaker says that she and S are "divided by two mother tongues. Both nomadic". Both the speaker and S are divided by two different languages, but they find comfort in at least one commonality they share- both belong to nomadic languages rather than the metropolitan or the standardized language. Therefore, they could keep each other's company and assume to have reached an understanding: "He spread the word 'vast' between us" and she sees "the sky as he might have" (87).

In the poem, 'Untitled Dance', the speaker finds "possibilities in interpretation" rather than accepting

truths as fixed. Finally, inspired by the dance of the moon that she witnesses, she settles with words that are at best un-worded

The moon labored over the hill, breaking the dark's code.

When I turned to show him how a moon too can appear timid, it had moved.

The moon that throws light in the dark of the night symbolizes hope or meaning, but it too appears timid in illuminating fixed meanings. The moon's timidity is symbolic of the loose structures of language, meanings, and definitions. The last two lines of the poem further reinforce the idea that language and its meanings are relative. What remains for the speaker are ruins of the language, accentuated by the playful moon-light

The ruins complete in its light.

No words pass between us. Vultures overhead were combing.

Finally, the speaker, from attempting to comprehend the lama dance, the identity of the "unmasked" dancers, S and M's mutual disagreements with each other's interpretations of the lama dance, the gesture of trees and the gardener's understanding of it, ends up settling with words (after seeing the moon play hide-and-seek) in a deconstructive aporia- a state of impasse- as no words pass between her and S. It is as though there is a demise of nitions symbolized by "vultures combing overhead" (86). Thus, the 'dance of words' in the poem titled 'Untitled dance' cannot be ascribed fixed meanings and words are left open to multiple interpretations.

Many other poems in ROTH call attention to the philosophical aspect of the deconstructive mode of language, such as in another poem 'F's', the character F tries in vain to have control over his son with words that he thinks cannot be broken down (39). In an interview, Dhompa reveals that the deconstructive aspect of language comes into her poetry from the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence

For me, language stems from a desire to tell, to re-tell, and in a way get closer to that which I seek to know or comprehend. This is not entirely possible because language is a construction and comes with rules and expectations, whereas life and the emotional world is not predictable or containable. The Buddhist concept of impermanence is a tool that helps me from taking "my language" too seriously or to view it as being the only way of telling a story. How does one use language, which assumes or intends one meaning, to speak of experiences and life which happen simultaneously and where meaning is in the process of living. (Dhompa)

There is a crafty weaving of language in its deconstructive mode in the verses of ROTH, especially in the poems that deal with the social and political complexities of being a woman and an exile- both as states of existence run over by social essences. The poems in ROTH work around a network of relationships, mainly that of a daughter in relation to others. The girl-child learns lessons about womanhood as she

grows up, such as women getting accustomed to the speech of silence in the poem 'How Thubten sang his song' (43). She begins to evaluate adjectives that must or must not be used for women in 'Laying the Grounds' (47). She observes that women in certain cultures are expected to adapt to their husband's world-order beginning from the in their surnames. But the girl character in Dhompa's poems also learns to use language in her own terms, mainly from her independent-minded mother. She pressingly declares in the poem 'Leh' Here are people who cannot adapt to change. After marriage they are given a new name. But mothers continue to press old names. (58)

The same language that is structured to exclude woman carries within itself the potential to deny exclusion or subjugation

In the beginning we use family as lineage for there are places still where the longer you go back, the stronger is your bone.

Sister. Sister, come wrap your wound in mine.

We are framed for departures we are never prepared for.

Walk here. Into this assemblage. Into this alley of slippery language. (52)

In the above lines from the poem 'Entry', the speaker's consciousness merges with the collective consciousness of women feminist writers, who seem to follow Virginia Woolf as they attempt to create a room of their own outside the male literary discourse.

Dhompa's voice transcends the feminist concerns and encompasses the social context of the subjugation of exiled Tibetans. The lines in the poem 'In the event of change' are telling

The context of my story changes when you enter. Then I am dung on the nomad's field. Then the everyday waking person.

……..

I am speaking your pace. Slippage of silk slippers.' (15)

The above lines could be interpreted for the post-colonial predicament where the subject's context changes from the native to the hybrid.2 The post-colonial writers have expressed the anguish of the colonizer's imposition of a foreign language (through its colonial institutions) on the natives. For the African novelist, Ngugi wa Thiango, for example, to write in English would be "wearing false robes of identity" (22). Dhompa conjures up (in the above quoted lines) the same image in the befitting symbol of shoes for the refugees, who have no permanent shelter and are destined to walk from place to place. As one wears the other's shoes in his or her peculiar journey, one is likely to slip and fall. So even if the other's shoes are made up with the richness and glamour of silk, these are uncomfortable in one's feet. Similarly, native language cannot be replaced by the foreign when it comes to expressing one's emotions.

The displacement of Tibetans in exile inevitably threatens a displacement of their language and culture. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile makes efforts to preserve the same through cultural institutions, but

the long-lasting exile of Tibetans has led to their inevitable assimilation into the culture and language of the host-countries. English, in particularly, envisioned as a language of international exchange and communication, is welcomed by the Tibetan community.3 Dhompa is multi-lingual as she has inherited the standardized Tibetan language of her exile community, the dialect of her region Nangchen from her mother and elders, English by virtue of her education in English medium institutions in India and America, and a functional familiarity with Nepali in Kathmandu and with Hindi in India. The different dialects and languages that the Tibetans live by in exile have implications on their identity and writings. The Tibetan English writings in India, such as by Sonam and Tenzin Tsundue, are embedded in 'Thinglish'- an exile mix of Tibetan, Hindi, and English. Dhompa hints at the inevitable problems faced by the displaced people during the intricate process of language acquisition; she renders the odd moment of translating the native emotions in a foreign language by a school boy in the poem 'Carried from here' I translate letters for parents whose children are learning other things. Unpredictable in his allegiance to English, a Tibetan son send orange mountains of love to his mother (30) The emotions are betrayed by words that belong to a system that is non-native. In the poem 'In Between' The walls threaten to expose us, shadows pinch as we mutter jouissance, jouissance, while the university teacher said the use of the word was a considerable error. A most lamentable error, given half of us are illiterate and unattached. Think of words in their system of birth (27)

The poem, 'Preparing for the third lesson', brings out yet another aspect that pertains to the status and class attached to the language of the supposedly superior Occident. In this poem, when children play the burying of a broken tooth, they are unable to remember the traditional prayers offered at such ceremonies S had just learned the "Lord's prayer" in school and took the occasion to show off.

Our protectors didn't speak English nor were we Christians. (46)

These lines suggest not only a symbolic baptism into English, but also the snobbery of glamour tagged with English language and its culture that S occasions to flaunt.

Dhompa also brings out the complexities in the very foundation of the sentiment of Tibetan nationalism through the issue of language. In the poem, 'Passage', S learns about patriotism through the vocabulary of another language (and thought) system

At the discovery of the word patriotism, S distends like sparkles on tin roofs. Tomorrow, and yet tomorrow, he says, he will march to liberate his country. (53)

Nationalism for Tibetans as such is what Partha Chatterjee calls a "derivate discourse" (Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse). For Tibetans in old Tibet, who had strong regional identities than national, if nationalism were to mean something it would be (sectarian) religion and native culture (or ethnic identity) as practiced in respective Tibetan provinces. But in exile, there came a different set of meanings for nationalism- a civic nationalism- learnt and adopted from new languages and ideologies.4 After having lost sight of the country, what remains with oneself is a rhetoric

in a "speech measured by what is within definition" (53); and definitions in another's language system might not always be congruent with the definitional markers in Tibetan language. Dhompa addresses the issues with languages for those Tibetans who are writing secular poetry in English:

Secular poetry is relatively new to Tibetans. As the first generation born into exile, we are just beginning to articulate our experience of being Tibetan outside Tibet. For this, we've chosen to write in English. We are entrusting a language different from our mother tongue to speak of the loss or the absence of a country. These are complex negotiations. ('Nostalgia in Contemporary Tibetan Poetics')

Dhompa's words echo the same concerns that the Indian novelist Raja Rao had expressed in the context of his double heritage- the Indian and the British- in his Foreword to Kanthapura

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. (vi)

For Tibetan diaspora (especially in the East), English is a language of another culture, but not the language of the nation that colonizes them. Therefore, the implication of learning the English language is different for Tibetans-in-exile than what it had been for Indians or Africans. The implication of adopting English in exile is also different from that of the forceful feeding of the communist-ridden Chinese in the state-run schools inside Tibet. Tibetans do not regard English as a language with a hegemonic force of the colonial apparatus unlike their Indian counterparts; 5 they regard English as a potential language that has strategically enabled them with rhetoric to address their identity concerns to the world audience. Therefore, the new generation Tibetans-in-exile can be said to live in the "third space" as people between cultures- an "interstitial passage between fixed identification" which "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4). This "third space" is a congratulatory platform for the new generation of Tibetans writing in English.

To conclude, language is used in its deconstructive mode in Rules of the House so that it is a metaphor to address the complex issues surrounding Tibetan culture and identity today. Dhompa's first book of poetry advocates a critical literacy among readers for understanding the challenges faced by a displaced community; it invites its readers to step into the exile-house of Tibetans and witness the complexities in their everyday lives.

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Black Feminist Discourse of Power in For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide

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A B S T R A C T

This paper discusses black feminist discourse of power in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem For Colored Girls Who have considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf. The work depicts the struggle of black women through a rainbow of experiences. At the end, the girls arrive at 'selfhood' by finding God in themselves. This paper focuses on how the patriarchal discourse lead to their suffereing and how they were able to claim back their identities as black females who only need to be loved and appreciated.

[Keywords: Notzake Shange, African American culture, women's literature, discourse, power.**]**

1. Introduction:

For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf is Shange's first, and most acclaimed, theater piece. It is not really a play in that it has no continuous plot or conventional development; it consists, rather, of a series of poetic monologues to be accompanied by dance movements and music—a form Shange calls the "choreopoem." According to Auslander, Shange originally wrote the monologues as separate poems in 1974, then began performing them in California with choreography and musical accompaniment under their collective title. After moving to New York City, she continued work on the piece, which opened on Broadway to an enthusiastic reception in 1976. Shange's for colored girls was second play, as Patricia Young claims, by a black woman to reach Broadway, preceded by Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun in 1959.

For Colored Girls has developed into a 2010 drama film adapted from Ntozake Shange's 1975 stage choreopoem play (Los Angeles Times, 2010). Written, directed and produced by Tyler Perry, the film features an ensemble cast which includes nine women playing different roles. David Noh indicates that like Shange's play — which is considered to be a landmark piece in African American literature and black feminism — the film depicts the interconnected lives of nine women, exploring their lives and struggles as women of color, all of which end with these women's self-realization and self-appreciation of who they are. For Colored Girls brought to the stage a perspective on what it is to be female and black in the modern United States that many in the Civil Rights Movement era found groundbreaking, especially in the fact that it was, and has continued to be, done in mainstream American stage and media venues. According to Hilton Als in The New Yorker's Critic's Notebook (March 5, 2007) that all sorts of people who might never have set foot in a Broadway house -- black nationalists, feminist separatists -- came to experience Shange's firebomb of a poem

(http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/For_Colored_Girls_Who_Have_Considered_Suicide_When_the_Rainbow_Is_Enuf).

Structurally, For Colored Girls is a series of twenty poems, collectively called a "choreopoem." Shange's poetry expresses the many struggles and obstacles that AfricanAmerican women face throughout their lives. It is performed by a cast of seven women characters, each of whom is known only by a color: "Lady in Yellow," "Lady in Purple," and so on. The poems deal with love, abandonment, domestic violence, rape, and abortion, embodied by each woman's story. The end of the play brings together all of the women for "a laying on of hands," in which Shange evokes the power of womanhood. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_Colored_Girls_Who_Have_Considered_Suicide_When_the_Rainbow_Is_Enuf).

2. Setting a Feminist Discourse of Power

Discourse determines who represents authority and when this authority can be used. Michel Foucault's discourse is always related to power, because discourse is the governing and ordering medium of every institution. His theory of discursive formation allows for the possibility of resistance and subversion of dominant discourses. Foucault regards discourse as a central human activity, because the dimension of discursive change will keep on existing as long as there are competing institutions. The discursive formation works by exclusion, that is the excluding and marginalizing certain categories such as women; this remark makes discourse of interest since all discourses are power related. Said follows the logic of Foucault's theories: no discourse is fixed for all time; it is both a cause and an effect. Discourse not only wields power but also stimulates opposition.

Discourse has received a great deal of attention by feminists. A male-dominated language fundamentally oppresses women. Foucault's argument is that what is "true" depends on who controls discourse; it is reasonable to believe that men's domination of discourses has trapped women inside a male "truth." From this point of view, it makes sense for women writers to contest men's control rather than retreat in the feminine discourse. Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1977) discusses women's discourse as being subordinate and made inferior by the patriarchal institution, which exerts power over women in every domain. Selden says that Millet extends her argument to the sex-role stereotyping; she says that sex is biological, while gender is cultural (138). Sex roles as perpetuated in society are repressive; further, they show the unequal relation of domination and subordination. The patriarchal oppression attempts to sustain the oppression through an ideology created by and for the oppressors. The oppressed tend to defend themselves as an institution against misrepresentation and stereotyping. Both parties conduct a struggle for power.

Men exclude the female because she lacks the power to shape literary values. Their values express a patriarchal culture where women are subject to degradation, domination and subordination. So, women

find themselves obliged by their gender to alleviate oppression by speaking out/up. French feminists have emphasized that Freud's "penis" or "phallus" is a symbolic concept of power; Selden believes that the "woman represents a subject position banished to outer darkness (the Dark Continent) by the castrating power of phallocentrism, and indeed, because such domination works its way through discourse, by 'phallogocentrism' (domination by the phallus logic)"(147). In The Laugh of the Medusa, Helene Cixous calls for women to put their bodies into writing: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (309). According to her, feminist writing can surpass the powerful discourse, assumingly the patriarchal system. She asks women to transgress the laws of the phallocentric discourse as the woman writer's special task. A woman needs to "invent for herself a language to get inside" since she already found herself using a male-dominated discourse. As Selden states, thinks that women's writing is connected with fluidity" (150); this, then, endows women with flexibility, volatility, and variability. Feminists seek to control discourse, and struggle for power; through writing women can find themselves exerting power in their own way.

Feminist criticism stems from one fundamental aspect, the discourse of power relations. The culture of feminist studies engages itself with a discourse where "truth" is related to the hierarchy of power. Foucault defines what is "true" as that which is most powerful and agreed upon by a consensus that it is the one that rules and has most authority. This brings into mind the idea that if there is the "most powerful", then there is also the "least powerful." Thus, we are dealing with a hierarchy of powers interpolating, in a hegemonic discourse. And from here comes the idea that the less powerful is oppressed and marginalized. Feminism comes to share the grounds with cultural critiscim. Feminists claim that their gender/sex is oppressed by the most powerful – that is the patriarchal domination. Feminists suppose that women are not only being oppressed but also marginalized, that they are not being given their own space. This paper discusses for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf by Ntozake Shange, an African American female playwright. Shange writes about sexual oppression in a hegemonic discourse where women are always victimized and marginalized the powerful patriarchal system from which women cannot escape.

Many feminists see that the female body is being colonized by the male dominance, referring to the phallogocenrism. Male dominance has taken place, for the man's possession of a "phallus" with which he dominates the female body, thus repressing the female to take the back-seat status. In her essay, Gilbert discusses the literary paternity where man /male uses his "pen-is" to write about his hegemonic discourse. He suppresses and represses the female/feminine body and determines that what should prevail is male-related. metaphorically, asserts that the male author "fathers" his texts, so the feminine is ruled and systematized through the legitimization of the paternal structure. Thus, the male text is "sword like" because it deals with the female discourse harshly in a way that confines them to what is legitimate from a paternal point of view, in this hegemonic discourse where the paternal cannot tolerate the

feminine. By emphasizing the heterogeneity of women's emotional and physical needs and experience, the women writers make a profoundly political statement. However, this does not come about because the aim of her work is primarily political. Indeed, Shange explains that this kind of 'point' can stifle creativity as she explained in an interview in Black Women Writers:

The commercial people tell me that one of the reasons the rest of my work hasn't been as commercially successful as for colored girls is that it has no point that they could sell. That's because there's going to be no more point. I am not writing about a point. for colored girls doesn't have a point either, but they made a point out of it. Those girls were people whom I cared about, people whom I offered to you for you to see and to know. Black and Latin writers have to start demanding that the fact that we're alive is point enough! (162)

In a feminist discourse, women are less powerful for being marginalized. Black women are doubly removed and marginalized from the dominant discourse. White feminists face the problem of being females - a matter of gender and what this embodies. Black feminists are not only concerned with the gender issue, but they are also oppressed and marginalized by their race and color. Audre Lorde in Sister Outsider, for example, explores how it is like when you are not oppressed by the male gender domination, but also by her same gender/sex. Black and female, she suffers from the white discourse including both male and female, and suffers from the male from a gender aspect, and from the females because she is a lesbian. My point is that feminists, whether white or black, lesbian or heterogeneous, or however they may be, are always left in the margin. A woman is always a subordinate, the other, the less powerful, the inferior, and the less beneficent. From here we can say that women are marginalized and powerless because they are weapon-less or phallic-less.

Because of the analogy between the male as power on one hand and female as powerless on the other hand, Cixous asks women to write their body. A woman should not feel that her body is a limitation, as was designated by the male dominance, but a woman should "write her body" to be heard. The body is the entity, which suffers from male dominance and therefore it (the body) must write out its own experience. As the body is the "Dark Continent" and must be discovered by the males, so should the females themselves discover it, for themselves in order to be able to fight back and illuminate that "penis-envy" or that "castration complex."

3. A Black Feminist Discourse of Choreography

for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf establishes an identity for Shange as a writer through her radical language, and expresses in depth the need of self-affirmation for black women. Shange changed her name from Paulette Williams as an act of protest against her Western

roots. The Zulu names she embraced, Ntozake ('she who comes with her own things') and Shange ('she who walks like a lion') emphasize both black young women for whom she speaks (Tate 149) and self naming is one method of self determination, expressing the power to be what one desires to be. There is a correlation between this and Shange's desire to enable young black women to understand their own situation.

Ntozake Shange in her for colored girls who have considered suicide, writes the body of the female/feminine. In her choreopoem, Shange refers to physical harm and violence done to the female body such as rape. The body must speak and write about rape to express the issue of violence and oppression, otherwise it will not be heard. Again Shange talks about abortion, to show how women, black women are oppressed; they are not only raped, but they need abortion to get out of the hegemonic male discourse. The body is an entity, which shows and tells many forms of oppression. Though the woman does not have a phallic power to fight back with, but she has her body from which she could write as her source of reaching power.

In a hegemonic discourse, for colored girls is concerned with the victimization of women and with finding the young black woman's voice and self. Shange writes as a woman for women trying to find a woman's voice, and "writes the body." Her use of language deconstructs literary and theatrical conventions as a means of foregrounding "the body." Shange even uses the lower case consistently trying to eliminate differences that bespeak a hierarchy/ power structure, and thus fighting for a democratizing drive that underlies for colored girls.

Shange's general presentation of males throughout the play leaves audience members seeing for colored girls as another black feminist attack on all men, mainly black. The men, most of the women in the choreopoem become involved with, are shallow, inconsiderate, and either incapable of communicating or unwilling to communicate except through sex, violence, or verbal abuse. And, finally, the accusation of blatant male-bashing might stem from Shange's efforts to drive home in the "latent rapist" section the complex reality of any woman's existence: that every man is a potential rapist, that "women relinquish all personal rights / in the presence of a man / who apparently cd be considered a rapist" (20).

Shange's men seem brutal baby –killers and beasts. Rather than consider Shange's whole picture of male-female relationships, one can either try to deny or justify the males' abusive behaviors in the choreopoem. While rightfully acknowledging the black male's victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, one cannot fail to make the men responsible for their own abusive behavior. Shange's message is that some black men have nothing but their phallic object/power, an object they use on as many women as possible. The effect of this line of reasoning is to make light of the nature and extent of suffering at the hands of some black men.

At no point does Shange minimize Beau Willie's victimization. Moreover, Shange suggests that women like Crystal are partly responsible for their oppression at the hands of patriarchy. After all, Crystal--for

whatever reasons-- stays in an abusive and destructive relationship. Those who maintain that Shange is not anti-black male should take notice of the choreopoem's opening narrative of "graduation nite," wherein the lady in yellow is flattered and unthreatened by a male's physical attraction to her:

bobby started lookin at me
yeah
he started lookin at me real strange
like I waz woman or something
started talkin real soft
in the backseat of that ol buick
WOW
by daybreak
I just cdnt stop grinnin (10).

Perhaps some radical feminists might attack Shange's openness in having this woman's "femaleness" defined by a male. Nevertheless, this encounter demonstrates that Shange does not believe every encounter with a male to be a threatening one, even in matters of sexuality. What Bobby says in that soft voice is unimportant; what matters is that this woman has a significant part of her identity, her sexual identity, defined positively for her. In Tate's article (160-161), she qualifies this, however, when she points that there are male exceptions to this rule, and she has worked with them:

In works by men there's usually an idea as opposed to a reality…Menalso generally approach the conflicts involved in the sexual or political identity of a male character in a way that allows them to skim over whatever the real crisis is … women are more in touch with their feelings; therefore, they're able to identify what it is they're doing and feeling. I also think that women use their feelings to a greater degree and in more varied ways than men do. (160-1).

Even the poem about abortion, "abortion cycle # 1," is not a comment on some male doing a female wrong. The indictment is not of a male who abandons a pregnant woman (the father is not even informed of the pregnancy). Instead, it is an indictment of a society of and women that ostracizes women who celebrate their sexuality freely, a society that makes a woman's biology her destiny of shame. While women's suffering in the choreopoem stems from their own vulnerabilities, their failed attempts to find the love they want to give the black male and to receive from him are not cause for them to swear off men altogether. Shange insistently characterizes Black women as being easily duped, and as emotionally frivolous. To an extent, the women's emotional and spiritual needs make them vulnerable. But they do not seek out abusive men. When the women arrive triumphant at the play's end, finding god in themselves, they discover an inner strength, a greater sense of self, and an independence that will allow them to deal better with emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying relationships in the future. They realize that they must love themselves before they can love fully or explains that her "target" in for

colored girls is not black men per se, but patriarchy in general, which is universal in its oppression of women. That some men feel under attack throughout the play comes as no surprise because for colored girls is a feminist piece.

From Shange, we can see feminist issues raised in different aspects. Shange is more concerned with the feminist issue as of female sexuality and its suffering at the hands of men. Discourse serves only those who are in power, ignoring that disadvantaged category of women who fight restlessly to gain power. Though women cannot change the discourse of male/female relationship, yet they can voice it in their writings creating their own discourse from their own point of weakness. Their bodies bespeak their weaknesses and, at the same time, their strengths.

4. Writing the Body

Much of the 'emotional' theme in for colored girls centers on 'interpersonal' relations (159) expressed in the choreopoem through representations for heterosexual relationships, from the post-finishing-high-school defloration in the back of a buick, to the end of an affair that: "waz an experiment/ to see how selfish I cd be/ if I wd really carry on to snare a possible lover/ if I waz capable of debasing my self for the love of another" (14). But, depressing though several of these poems are, especially "a nite with beau Willie brown" for colored girls is not predominantly concerned with the victimization of black women but with finding the young black women's voice and self.

Shange writes as a woman for women trying to find a woman's voice, and "writes the body" in the manner in which Julia Kristeva talks of it. Her use of language de-struct(ure)s literary and theatrical conventions as a means of foregrounding "the body", emotions and the workings of the unconscious. These may function as if the body and the speech are interconnected: Shange's system of spelling as detailed here is thus dictated by the body.

There are elements of deviation from the written norm, however, which cannot simply ascribed to the body. The most obvious of such deviations is the constant use of small letters. In Black Women Writers at Work, Shange attributes this to the influence of writers like LeRoi Jones and Ishmael Reed: "It bothers me, on occasion, to look at poems where all the first letters are capitalized. It's very boring to me. That's why I use the lower-case alphabet" (163). One might argue that the exclusive use of that lower case alphabet is equally boring, but if one looks for other explanations, the lower case might reflect an inferior sense of status(hierarchy/power structures), on the part of young black women who are at the center of the play representing mostly "every woman' character of for colored girls. Another woman representation shows at the end when the young black woman self-affirmingly says: "I found god in myself/ & I loved her/ I lived her fiercely" (63).

5. Semiosis As Form and Content

As a choreopoem, for colored girls combines music, song, dance and poetry. What these four elements have in common is that their systems of signification foreground the characteristics of Kristeva's semiotic disposition, being rhythmic, repetitive, non-linear and complex in their form as well as indeterminate in their meaning, resonating the fluidity of women's writing of the body. As such, they stand in direct relation to the semiotic 'chora' which denotes "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (25). They signal the expression of "discrete quantities of energy" which "move through the body" in an as yet non-signifying manner. The body, through its drives and movements, and the body creates "the ordering principle of the semiotic chora" (27). The disposition of the semiotic outlook as an utterance expresses the self as body, or body as self. The semiotic characteristic is disruptive of all structures created by self because the self is recreated through the changing reflexes of the semiotic body movements. It refuses their norms and setting up the self as a counter-authority. The choreography is thus self-affirming rather than self-denying. It signals the body that will not be denied.

Shange, through the four-fold foregrounding of the semiotic by combining poetry, dance, song, and music, 'writes the body' all-pervadingly. It is thus inevitable that at the end of for colored girls the young black woman should "find god in herself and love her fiercely"; this is what the choreopoem drives towards- literally and metaphorically. Shange's black woman's self gradually emerges as a separate, discrete entity, a new formation signaling independence and love of self.

Another aspect is naming which belongs to the symbolic order, and optimizes social mobility. Not naming is therefore one way of refusing the symbolic order and thus the categorizations that dominate society. It is important in this context that 'choreo' refers not only to dance but also to the group, which in for colored girls is an anonymous group of seven ladies, differentiated by color of dress rather than name. Without a name which gives a specific identity they can move literally, for the individual poems in for colored girls are separated from each other by the re-grouping of the performers- into and out of identities which they inhabit for the space of a particular poem or section. This ability to change roles indicates the possibility of change per se; the young black woman is not fixed in a role in the same way that the performers are not. She can move on, change through the body; it is for this reason that for colored girls offers movement, instability, the subject is in process/ on trial, or in the making, that is the "the semiotic" as form and content.

6. Debating Images of Black Males in Feminist Discourse

Cynthia Bily points that many have criticized the play for being too negative toward black men, but Shange has always attempted to direct the focus of the discussion back on the women. The play is about the experiences of black women, and how they come a long way to 'be' at the end. To insist on a "balanced" view of the men in their lives is to deny these women's experiences. The play, Shange insists,

does not accuse all black men of being abusive. These black women do not reject men or seeking a life without men. The women desire men and love them, and crave for that love to be returned.

To reach out for the text, some have seen beau willie brown dropping his children from a fifth-story window, as helpless crystal looks on, as Ntozake Shange's signature characterization of the black male in for colored girls. An embodiment of traits of most of the men in the choreopoem up to that point, beau willie is violent, abusive, deceptive, and seems to lack ambition and to offer nothing but destruction of Crystal's life. Indeed this particular example of male brutality and Shange's general presentation of males throughout the play leave audience members seeing for colored girls as little more than another black feminist's ruthless and unjustified attack on all men. The men, most of the women in the choreopoem become involved with, are shallow, inconsiderate, and either incapable of communicating or unwilling to communicate except through sex, violence, or other abuse. And, finally, the accusation that every man is a potential rapist, that "women relinquish all personal rights / in the presence of a man / who apparently cd be considered a rapist" (20).

These images and portrayals have led critics like Robert Staples to assert that in "watching a performance of for colored girls, one sees a collective appetite for black male blood" (26). Jacqueline Trescott insists that Shange's men "are scheming, lying, childish, and brutal baby-killers…, beasts humiliated for the message of sisterly love" (5). Rather than consider Shange's whole picture of male-female relationships, these critics try to deny or justify the males' abusive behaviors in the choreopoem. Staples adds, "[t]here is a curious rage festering inside black men because, like it or not, they have not been allowed to fulfill the roles (i.e. breadwinner, protector) society ascribes to them" (26). While rightfully acknowledging the black male's victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, Staples fails to make the black male responsible for his own abusive behavior. Staples' comments are typical of the patriarchy's reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator. And while Staples does not subscribe to a racist ethos, as do many black males, Staples writes that "some black men have nothing but their penis, an object they use on as many women as possible, and in their middle years they are deprived of even that mastery of the symbols of manhood…" (26). Such line of reasoning makes light of the nature and extent of suffering at the hands of some black men.

Sandra H. Flowers, in "Colored Girls: Text-book for the Eighties", defends Shange's presentation of black men by offering insight into the complexity of beau willie brown's character:

…Beau Willie Brown is the quintessential black man of his generation [i.e., the Vietnam era]. By this, I do not mean, nor does Shange intend to imply, that Beau Willie Brown is all there is to black manhood. Conversely, I am not suggesting that the political realities embodied in Beau Willie justify his treatment of or his attitude toward Crystal. Instead, I believe that Shange's compassion for black men surfaces most noticeably in this poem and that her characterization of Beau Willie recognizes some of the external factors which influence relationships between black men and women. (52)

While women's suffering in the choreopoem stem from their own vulnerabilities, their failed attempts to find the love they want to give the black male and to receive from him are not cause for them to swear off men altogether. Curtis Rodgers writes that "in her unrelenting stereotyping of Black men as always 'shucking' and 'jiving'… [Shange], without realizing it,…insistently caricatures Black women as being easily duped, and as emotionally frivolous. This is because Shange's for colored girls invariably take up with 'those' Black men whom she damns as mean and trifling" (11). Rodgers' inherent use of 'those' contradicts and all-male stereotype. Still, Rodgers implies that men's behavior is always predictable. Perhaps he might the legitimacy of acquaintance rape. To an extent, Rodgers is correct: the women's emotional and spiritual needs make them vulnerable. The Lady in Red's feeling of "want[ing] to jump up outta my bones /… & be done wit myself" (65) is hardly a frivolous emotion. Perhaps Rodgers might argue the frivolity of anyone's desire to love and be loved. Shange clarifies: "… just because [some black men are] unloving, doesn't mean we, women, don't need to be loved" (qtd in Ribowsky 45).

When the women arrive triumphantly at the play's end, finding god in themselves, they discover an inner strength, a greater sense of self, and an independence that will allow them to deal better with emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying relationships in the future. They realize that they must love themselves before they can love fully or accept love. Patricia Young indicates that the concluding gesture in the play is powerful; the seven women experience a laying on of hands as they lock their hands together to represent an impenetrable circle that stands as a shield from pain and to empower themselves with each others' courage. Shange emphasizes that women must nurture and protect one another. Shange explains that her 'target" in for colored girls "is not black men per se, but the patriarchy in general, which [she] view[s] as universal in its oppression of women" (Smith 12). That some men feel under attack throughout the play comes as no surprise to Shange, who admits that for colored girls is "a heavy feminist piece" (qtd in Ribowsky 43). But the fact that a woman is a feminist does not mean she hates men. There is little question, however, that Shange seeks to challenge the patriarchal worldview that has prevented the black woman from telling their own stories which articulate the needs and expectations of black women. Kwame Dawes explains that the ultimate vision of triumph and possibility at the end of the work illustrates Shange's commitment to an Afrocentric vision in her articulation of her feminist perspective through the use of black music, Afrocentric dance, and the distinctly Afrocentric narrative style.

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The Poetics of John Ashbery

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ABSTRACT

John Ashbery (1927-) takes the postmodernist polysemy of meaning in interpreting a work of art and the polyphony of styles in composing as his forte. He questions the various linguistic codes and makes us aware of the artificiality of the language. All political, ethical and aesthetic imperatives are rhetorical constructs. The writer uses language to persuade the reader to accept the formulated truth and he intervenes in the process of perception by his/her politics of representation. Though his iconoclastic approach towards writing and individuality of style has kept him aloof from mainstream academic syllabi, yet he has now become a prominent figure in Contemporary American Literature. It is interesting to Ashbery's poetry revives the Romantic sensibility while applying the postmodern syndromes of immediacy, indeterminacy, disjunctive syntax, open-ended and multiplicity of interpretations. This paper explores the aesthetics of John Ashbery's poetry.
[Keywords: (De)Construction, Aesthetics, Poetics, Response, Contextualism, Digital media.**]**

It is interesting to note how contemporary American poetry is zanus-faced. It is specially noted for innovation and experimentation. Although it gives new interpretation to life, inaugurates new styles of composing, evolves new poetics, yet it looks back at its predecessors for reviving the imagination and reflects the spirit of Emerson, Wallace Stevens or Poe. Several experimental aesthetic movements- Romanticism, Symbolism, Vorticism, Imagism, Surrealism, modernism, modernism, and post-structuralism have influenced different genres of poetry.

However, the innovative spirit of the contemporary poets is not yet abated. If we distinguish between the aesthetic self, social self and the inner self, then Ashbery's ruminations are mostly related to this third category or unconsciousness. Matthew Arnold has observed in his Oxford lecture, "On the Modern Elements in Literature," (1869) that poetry primarily engages with the question, "how to live?" He has coined the phrase "imaginative reason" to emphasize on poetry that relies on "the senses and the understanding" rather than the medieval poetry that thrived on "the heart and imagination." John Ashbery (1927-) takes the polysemy of meaning in interpreting a work of art and the polyphony of styles in composing as his forte. Ashbery deconstructs the traditional presumptions about the objectives, themes, and narrating events sequentially while composing a verse. He is concerned about the limits of language in expressing the momentary thoughts that flash in the mind. The sub-conscious and the unconscious are brought to the forefront to highlight the volatile nature of consciousness. Ashbery's work is a criticism of the attempt of the traditional poets to unify thoughts that recur in the mind, often haphazardly, or to formalize experience. He is grouped with the "New York School of Poets", who

extended the frontier of composing after the Pound- Eliot revolution. The other important poets in this group are Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch etc. Their style is passionate, experimental, and innovative. They incorporated the style of art and music in their works and revolted against the solemn note in modernist poetry. Koch attacked the staleness of modernist poetry in Seasons on Earth:

The Waste Land gave the time's most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
Or fool around in any way in poems,… 1

They were partly inspired by the "projectivist" ideal that form is only an extension of content as propagated by the new formalists like Charles Olson, R. Duncan etc. Ashbery finds coherence among dispersed particulars and interpretive codes. He dramatizes shifts of emotional levels, surge of thought, and resonance of feelings. However, unlike most of the "New York School of Poets", he is not solely interested in language games. Instead of referring to abstract ideas, he deals with lived situations and the open-ended verses are more compatible to express the individual mind. His familiar and textureless language reflects the changing moods of the persona. For Ashbery writing is an event, a praxis that aims at dismantling an established ideology and broadens the horizons of meaning, to return to the world of human beings from the specific domains of the abstract and the conventional. This approach to poetry was emulated by some of the contemporary poets like Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, Ann Lauterbach, James Tate etc. who are popularly known as the "LANGUAGE POETS".

Ashbery prefers the aesthetics of indeterminacy. He deconstructs "pure Affirmation", that "doesn't affirm anything" as stated in Self- Portrait in a Convex Mirror. Unlike the realists like Auden who considers that the ulterior purpose of poetry or any work of art is to "disenchant and disintoxicate", Ashbery's work sometimes purposely lack logic. He is one of the last romantics in American poetry, as Yeats or Dylan Thomas was in British poetry. Ashbery is somewhat akin in temperament to the romantics and advocates the Emersonian prophesy of spontaneity and autonomity of imagination and transcendentalism. Though Ashbery's style is postmodernist and is one of the last "Avant Garde", yet he appropriates the romantic sensibility and the credo of subjectivism. Harold Bloom tries to draw a parallelism between Ashbery and his precursor Wallace Stevens. Ashbery appropriates and replicates the theme of "mythology of self", which was inaugurated by Stevens. The voice of an individual passing through the different phases of life, his dilemma,

discontent, resolutions are presented through blurred visions, pieces of conversation, pastiche. In Three Poems, he uses the metaphor of coming to a fork in the road, which rejoins at the end. The admixture of reality and fantasy completes the journey of the mind. The regions through which we pass are constantly modifying us. John Ashbery also questions the various linguistic codes and makes us aware of the

artificiality of the language. All political, ethical and aesthetic imperatives are rhetorical constructs. The writer uses language to persuade the reader to accept the formulated truth and he intervenes in the process of perception by his/her of representation. Though his iconoclastic approach towards writing and individuality of style has kept him aloof from mainstream academic syllabi, yet he has now become a prominent figure in Contemporary American Literature. His early book, Some Trees (1956) won him the Yale Younger Poet Series with W.H. Auden as the jury. Two of his widely discussed poems: Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror and FlowChart won him the Pulitzer Award in 1976, National Book Award, Critic's Circle Award, the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal. In 1984 he received the Bollingen Prize and MacArthur Prize fellowship in the following year and also two Guggenheim Fellowships subsequently. Most of his early poems are collected in the volume, Selected Poems (1985) and his later poems are collected in the volume entitled, Notes from the Air (2007). This same year Ashbery reached his eightieth birthday and have perpetuated his aptitude of producing new, controversial, stimulating classics with vibrant experimentalism. In 1992 he was honoured with Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and the Antonio Feltrivelli International Prize for Poetry. He is now a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1989-90 he was Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard. As a Chancellor he had presided over the Academy of American Poets from 1988 to 1999.

I have had so many identity crises
in the last fifty years you wouldn't believe it. (Ashbery 1992 6)

The Pound-Eliot movement revised the Romantic view. However, the post fifties poets and critics have expressed their skepticism about T.S. Eliot's theories of 'Objective Correlative', 'Impersonality', 'Classicism', 'Dissociation of Sensibility'etc. Randall Jarrell has questioned whether Eliot followed his theoretical formulations in praxis. Jarrell has observed in The Third Book of Criticism (1965) that Eliot's Wasteland is not so much an austere "criticism of the contemporary world", as the anguished "relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life."2 Jarrell concludes that T.S. Eliot "was one of the most subjective poets who ever lived". Wallace Stevens' reading of Eliot further clarify that it is his "supreme cry of despair…not his generation's," (ibid). Often it becomes difficult for the reader to differentiate between the "man who suffers" and the "mind that creates". Is it really possible to separate the identity of the poet from the man of the world as claimed by T.S. Eliot in his essays? Karl Shapiro's collection of essays, The Poetry Wreck (1975) reflects his polemical rejection of what he saw as the poetry 'Establishment'. The essay entitled as "T.S. Eliot: The Death of literary Judgment", articulates a rejection of Eliot's critical authority, which was already widely felt by the presentgeneration poets, critics and readers. Contemporary American poetry is specially noted for its innovative techniques and experimentation. The readers are exposed to a variety of poetic fare- Black Mountain Poets, the New York School, Beat poets, Confessional poets, Immigrants etc. Robert Lowell (1917-1977) has suggested

that poetry could be fragmentary and subjective. In Life Studies he has advocated a movement beyond the merely literary, "a breakthrough back into life". He was perhaps first in the American soil to realize that "the times have changed. A drastic experimental art is now expected and demanded."3 Contrary to Eliot's technique, verse is now no longer cloaked with allusions, but is characterized by a fresh invention; the rhythm is compatible with the expression of emotion. Poetry is the saga of an individual confronting life, not on his father's terms but on his own. Robert Pinsky has stressed on the rhetoricity of all poetic forms, whether 'open' or 'closed' in The Situation of Poetry (1976). Different trends in contemporary poetry have led most of the popular poets to strike a middle way between the followers of Eliot and the oppositional poetics of a figure like Allen Gingsberg. Adrienne Rich has observed that the contemporary writers explore and write about what is "humanly possible" (Rich 1) instead of referring to classical allusions and framing theories. Writing is rather a journey through possibilities and fluidity of thought, the unexplored probabilities beyond compromised, degraded, dated system. Ashbery explores the nuances of an individual's experience with innovative improvisations in composing. He is conscious of the slippage of metaphor/language. Charles Altieri says in Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry, that the "self-conscious rhetoric" in Ashbery, is a reaction against "rhetorics that claim naturalness".

Almost all the poems of Ashbery are 'writerly texts' that invite the reader's participation for construing the meaning of the open-ended texts. The poet's identity accrues from multiple voices, rather than thrusting one assumed mono-dimensional interpretation based on biographical or historical study. While Whitman left his Song Of Myself without a final period, Ashbery directs his readers to a mélange of contexts, fragmentary episodes, moments, descriptive scenes and images that defy any definite conclusion. Critics find it difficult to locate any key passage or interpretative center/ node around which the heterogeneous elements of the poem are woven. For example his The Skaters can be interpreted in three ways: as a descriptive poem, autobiographical and self-reflexive. This dissemination of a fixed meaning or central focus gives a free play to the reader's mind and lures him/her to a web of unending interpretations. While commenting on Ashbery's style, J. D. McClatchy has written that "the effect is rather like overhearing a radio in the next room whose dial someone is slowly turning: one minute Beethoven, the next hip-hop, the next a traffic report. All are equal in the 'flowing, fleeting' moment, nothing is excluded or judged."4The prize-winning Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror begins as a biography of the Italian mannerist painter, Parmigianino, and ends in a psychological monologue. The poem is a ganglion of voices from history, yet it is relevant to the present mind because "it carries / The momentum of a conviction that had been building…" (ibid). At times the speaker seems to confide in the reader, at other times he prefers to be a silent observer who records his impressions vaguely: "too close to ignore, too far / For one to intervene," (ibid).

John Ashbery's Individuality and Tradition

John Ashbery imbibes the romantic credo of subjectivism in his poetics. Unlike the Pound-Eliot tradition he does abide by the theory of "Impersonality" in work of art. For him the concept of reality is itself an illusion and life cannot have any objective experience. The unconscious mind cannot be expressed objectively. Poetry not only mirrors the society but makes us aware "of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate" (Stanford 51). To T.S. Eliot this "dark psychic material" is a sort of "demon" without a name. He does not celebrate the postmodernist concept of inadequacy of language and has said that the poet writes "not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort," (Stanford 51). It is an act of purging out the unseen feelings. In literary criticism T.S. Eliot has distinguished between four kinds of emotions. "Personal emotion" is evoked by the biographical details of the poet's life, "structural emotion" evolves gradually from the reading of a poem, "art emotion" has an emotional impact on the reader, and "emotion without an adjective" can be synonymously for any of these three related emotions. It may be observed that while the modernists try to solve and affirm, postmodernism does not affirm Zygmunt Bauman has highlighted that in postmodern sociology, "there is no longer a need, or a room, for those 'hard-core' intellectuals whose expertise is 'legitimation,' i.e., supplying proof that what is being done is universally correct and absolutely true, moral and beautiful," (Natoli 441). It would be more appropriate now to emphasize on repression and relativity instead of trying to legitimize and objectify thoughts, experiences, messages etc. Krieger Murray has said in "A Window to Criticism" that poetic language can be viewed in three ways. In the modernist view it is seen as a "window to the world." In the postmodernist interpretation it is an enclosed field of "endlessly faceted mirrors ever multiplying its maze of reflections but finally shut up within itself." Murray concludes that this set of mirrors "becomes window again after all." M.H. Abrams has observed in his book on literary criticism The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (1953), that the mimetic function art has asserted a possible equation between external reality and "the reality that is created within the symbols of art, so that the latter mirrors the former." In postmodern aesthetics this process of creating/mirroring reality is not to be universally accepted but is subject to changes because it is based on the individual artist's vision and perceptions. A deconstructive analysis reveals how a text undermines its foundation by revealing the internal contradictions and biases. The incidental features of a text can betray or subvert an "essential" message. Paul de Man has explained that to understand deconstruction in a structuralist context needs to analyze a text "as grids, as patterns" that are not sustained in the work. Catherine Belsey has argued that the issue of finding "truth" has become "superfluous to cultures that stand outside" it (Natoli 442). Post-structural and postmodern practice "displays truth as a linguistic tyranny which arrests the proliferation of meanings, assigns values and specifies norms," (Natoli 446). Belsey has taken resistance as an enterprise which does not struggle within the nexus of "binary oppositions" but it is realized "within a story of meanings that are always

plural, subject to excess, in process, contradictory," (Natoli 446). In contemporary texts the modernist desire to locate "history of truth," is replaced by postmodernist alternatives/liminality/in-between conclusions, "textual uncertainties" and "conflicting interests," (ibid). Ashbery sometimes coins words to express some sort of inexplicable phobia related to acute identity crises as found in "The Large Studio" from the collection entitled Hotel

...And the bowsprit (a word I have never understood)
comes undone, comes all over me, washes
my pure identity from me- help! [Italics mine] (Ashbery 1992 7)

Harold Bloom has referred to it as askesis and has explained it as "a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude," (Bloom 1973 15). In an interview in the Paris Review, Ashbery has admitted the of using uncommon words to inflict gags and tricks on the readers. He has quoted the last sentence from his only novel, co-authored with James Schuyler, A Nest of Ninnies (1969) to explain his choice for rare words: "So it was that the cliff dwellers, after bidding their cousins good night, moved off towards the parking area, while the latter bent their steps toward the partially rebuilt shopping plaza in the teeth of the freshening foehn, [Italic mine]."11 Ashbery tries to make his readers fend themselves, consulting the dictionaries and thus in the process they are closing one book and opening another. He gives an explanation of the word as "a kind of wind that blows in Bavaria that produces a fog," (ibid). Most of the poets are interested in the experiential "unwrapped primal world," (Ramanan 130) and establish a counter discourse to the Eliotian syndrome of intellect and ratiocination. Patrizia Lombardo and Kevin Mulligan of the "Geneva School of Emotions" have noticed in the Critical Quaterly "a contemporary against reason, or nationality or logos." Ashbery inspects how the same event can affect the individuals differently. The attempt to find a fixed entity of home perpetuated as an unending phenomenon in "Cop and Sweater":

Now those homeless hirsutes we call men
Are on our backs...
Sometimes a plan will come
to take one of them away... (Ashbery 1992 22)

The phrase "waiting cemetery" in the same poem recalls the existential angst and the desire to resist it is apparent in the lines:

A man could smash through
this, drain the Slough of Despond
build individual habitats for bird and person,...(ibid)

Ashbery's self-indulgent tone makes him a belated romantic. He advocates the Emersonian prophesy of spontaneity and autonomy of imagination. Ashbery is also a postmodern transcendentalist who believes that the ultimate reality transcends or goes beyond human experience. He is a follower of the doctrine of

"Surrealism" and prefers to work against chronology, causality and sense of unity. He explores the mysteries of experience and depths of feeling in individuals who encounter varied situations. Theodore Roethke had tried to devise a "psychic short-hand when his protagonist is under great–stress" (Coyle 340) as stated in Praise to the End! (1951). Ashbery delves into the mythology of the 'Self' to weave the saga of an alienated individual, placed within the forces of the cosmos. The trespassing of the subconscious mind in the conscious elemental world is narrated in "Music Reservata:"

We are born, buried for a while, then
spring up just as
everything is closing... (Ashbery 1992 24)

In Flow-Chart, he establishes the importance of "our coming to know our- selves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life…"5 The voice of an individual passing through the different phases of life, his dilemma, discontent, resolutions are presented by Ashbery through pieces of conversations that comprise the spectrum of life. Nostalgic commemoration of childhood days is the theme of Ashbery's The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers. The reader is reminded of the Wordsworthian Immortality Ode as the persona recollects the sweet-salad days:

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers. 6

Unlike the Romantics who lament the bygone days, Ashbery accepts change and passage of time positively. He says in Our Youth, collected in The Tennis Court Oath that:

You will never have that young boy
That with the monocle
Could have been your father… 7

This change is a necessary part of life for Ashbery unlike Wordsworth who sadly reminisce the "visionary gleam" of youth. Ashbery embraces the new appropriating the past and engages with the questions of: "how to live, what to do?"8 in Grand Galop. Indecision, uncertainty and change are delineated to foreground the human world. Thus, he claims in the poem 'Indelible, inedible', collected in the Shadow Train: X

And regroup, to reappear next year in
A new light,
The light of CHANGE…(ibid)

Romantic glorification of the past is juxtaposed with the idea of mobility of memory in 'Decoy', collected in The Double Dream of Spring:

…our pyramiding memories,…
Seeking in occasions new sources of memories,…
…memories will keep us going, alive,… (ibid)

He states in 'The Instruction Manual', collected in Some Trees:

Here I am then, continuing but ever beginning

My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers…9

The persona of 'Clepsydra', in Rivers & Mountains is time itself, and the poem is contemplation on how it feels while it is passing through multifarious scenes. For Ashbery the public man of feeling remains at the centre of his thought. His solipsistic aestheticism is more generalized than personal. The poetic self emerges from a combination of multiple selves. The desire to return to the past is juxtaposed with the desire to rise above and proceed in the poem entitled "Voyage in the Blue". A rehabilitation of the past ideals is necessary, "yet in the having we shall be growing, rising above it / into an admixture of deep blue enameled sky and bristly gold stars," (Corn 241). Ashbery's work is an appropriation of Romanticism and a leap into Postmodernism. In an interview in the Paris Review he has stated that he was "particularly attracted to the Metaphysical poets and to Keats, and [he] had a Chaucer course, which [he] enjoyed very much." 11 He sometimes adopts the breaking-device of kenosis (Bloom 1973 14) to deviate and appropriate on his predecessors. His "The King" is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet and begins with the line from the Elizabethan bard's work, "So have I heard and do in part believe it," (Ashbery 1992 27). He is aware of the lost self amidst deterioration of values. He makes an attempt to find out the banes of civilization in 'Decoy', collected in The Double Dream of Spring:

…The twentieth-century scheme of things;

That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and seeing into, Descending code of values…

…deterioration of moral values, punctuated

By acts of corporate vandalism every five years,…8

However, unlike the modernists he does not lose all his hope on the present where "things fall apart" to use W.B. Yeats' phrase. Ashbery, as a postmodernist views the absence of the CENTRE, "the centre cannot [or rather does not] hold" as a mark of freedom. For him this polyphony, without a single centre takes us towards greater naturalism. Afterall, life is not one-dimensional and symmetric. It leads us to varied experiences which have no coherent order or meaning. Instead of trying to deduce a unified meaning in the poem, the reader should enjoy the dynamic motion in Ashbery's poetry. Ashbery composes out of delight and creates an intermediate style which is an appropriation upon T.S. Eliot's classical allusiveness, Ezra Pound's imagism and vorticism, Robert Lowell's "breakthrough" into life narrative, surrealism and the idiosyncratic style of 'Beat generation'. Poet of every generation try to break free from "the prevalent dogmas of the day and define a new imperative," 12 as observed by Dr. Acharya in her article. Critics are aware of the temporality of canons. Harold Bloom has juxtaposed Stevens' Le Monocle de Mon Oncle with Ashbery's Fragment to reveal the similarity in style and composition, (Bloom 1973 142).). He explores the revelation of unconscious impulses, projects the images in dream and advocates individuality while being aware of the existentialist angst. The state of

the world or the meandering consequences that are resonated in the mind cannot be tracked solely by causality. Thus the poem, "The King" ends with the lines:

...No explanation

is offered, and none necessary...(Ashbery 1992 28)

"Unexpected details" as said by Ashbery always intervene the logical proceedings of the mind and "there is more to inconstancy than you will want to hear." Uncertainties always find their space in the mind as in the external world. The uncertainty of being is stressed in the concluding lines of "By Forced Marches:"

I am all I have. I am afraid. I am left alone. (Ashbery 1992 31)

He writes on the different aspects of self-realization: interpersonal, Dionysian, occult or abstract. Another important aspect of Ashbery's work is an indifference to the exigencies of American politics and power-game. He has no political or cultural sanction or partisan motive behind writing. He is perhaps the most self-conscious and least programmatic among the contemporary poets. He did not think specifically about techniques or subject matters for his poetry because he took poetry as the "chronicle of the creative act that produces it..." (Elliott 1098). Agnes Heller has argued in her article, "Existentialism, Alienation, Postmodernism: Cultural Movements as Vehicles of Change in the Patterns of Everyday life," that postmodernism "does not stand for a particular politics of any kind," (Natoli 447) because it does not follow any type of "fixed distinction." Ashbery appreciates his fellow poet, Frank O' Hara in his lecture on the 'Frank O'Hara's Question'. He says that O'Hara's poetry "has no program…it does not speak out against the war in Vietnam or in favour of civil rights, it does not attack the Establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe, (Shetley 109)." Some critics like Louis Simpson have accused Ashbery for his reticence on political issues and nonco-operation with political protests. Ashbery reacted to the charges and replied to Simpson in a letter which was subsequently published in the Nation, 29 May 1967: "All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mould of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action," (ibid). However, Ashbery's poetry never terminates into a political manifesto or a philosophical doctrine. One field of study or activity should not overlap with another field. He does not write to indoctrinate the minds but to give pleasure.

Influence of Abstract Expressionist painters on Ashbery

Poets like John Ashbery, Frank O' Hara have tried to draw a kinship between painting and poetry. While Philip Sidney thought of poetry as a 'speaking picture', Ashbery and O' Hara who were eminent art critics, adopted the technique of Abstract Expressionist artists in poetry. The words and phrase are verbal icons that cast the images that flash in the mind without any attempt to synchronize them. Ashbery's style of composing traces the entire process that goes into the making of a poem. This technique is somewhat

akin to that of the Abstract Expressionist painter, Jackson Pollock, popularly known as 'Jack the dripper'. Pollock's drip painting takes the method of creation as the subject of art. Similarly, Ashbery juxtaposes contexts and images as they enter and leave the mind randomly without any apparent causeeffect relationship. Painting provides a starting point for the poets own self-portrait – a 'Self' that is omnipresent in Ashbery's work, an accumulation of ongoing and changing experiences. The poet's direct address to the painter in Ashbery's Self- Portrait in a Convex Mirror is a reminder of the two separate worlds that are the mirror images of each other. They are brought together in Ashbery's work through the alchemy of artistic process. If the reader juxtaposes Ashbery's Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror and the painting by Parmigianino, which inspired it, then s/he can notice Ashbery's unique ability to explore the verbal implications of painterly space. He gives a verbal transcription of Parmigianino's distorted images and the poem resonates with the visual impression of the painting. As paints are used to conceal unwanted spots similarly, "a smile paints the easy vapor that rises from all/ human activity," (Ashbery 1992 29). In 1952 Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting." In the hands of an Abstract Expressionist the canvas became a field or arena in which to act rather than to analyze and explain. Jackson Pollock's "Action Painting" captures the images in a state of happening (not in a state of stasis). The static, immobile and inanimate objects are never his subjects. His painting is much near to the expression of a "life- experience" (Grana 149): framed in a varied matrix of inter-personal and intra-personal relationships. Clement Greenberg has referred to this genre as the 'American Style.' Similarly, Ashbery juxtaposes contexts and images as they enter and leave the mind randomly without any apparent cause-effect relationship. As Pollock's canvas comprises daubs of paints sprinkled to baffle the readers, Ashbery and contemporary Language Poets have an obtuse style of writing with frequent shifts in tone, time, voice, scraps of conversation, admixture of the refined and the demotic to create a kind of verbal collage. This plurality makes the poem difficult to understand but at the same time it dismantles any established ideology or the claim of any authentic voice. The indeterminacy of Ashbery's subject matter is stated clearly in 'Syringa' that begins with the line: "Its subject/ Matters too much and not enough," (Perloff)3. The kaleidoscope of words is sustained by visual imagination. Roland Barthes observation is pertinent here to understand the importance of sight. He says that "sight is the only sense in which continuity is sustained by the addition of tiny but integral units: space can be constructed only from completed variations," (Language, Feb.1978)10. Scraps of conversations, variations in tones can be brought together like fragments in a collage to open implied possibilities. Ashbery creates frames of scenes and actions instead of describing them. The opening lines of 'Leaving the Atocha Station' in The Tennis Court Oath, juxtapose images as they pass by, however haphazardly or waywardly:

The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness…

The fried bats they sell there

Dropping from sticks,…

Your prayer folds…

The garden…

Blind dogs expressed royalties…7

The poet tries to capture the moment when a train rattles out of a station of no particular significance. Like a painter who not only portrays inanimate, still objects but also eternalizes evanescent moments, Ashbery also uses painterly words and phrases to make the readers recollect their past experiences of pulling out of a station. The use of words and the use of paints coalesce indistinguishably in "Baked Alaska:"

I refuse to open your box of crayons...
there may be something new in some combination
of styles, some gift in adding the addled
colors to our pate... (Ashbery 1992 53)

Most of his poems can be alternatively called as epitomes of living experiences/ moments. His poetry is "vehicular" to quote the Emersonian term.

Positioning Ashbery within the tenets of post-modernism

The deconstructionist and post-modernist interpretations does not differentiate between "literary" and "communicative" language. Postmodernism considers all writings, even non-literary and all forms of communication as texts. The whimsicalities of his thought find expression in his arbitrary use of language, individuality of style which is synchronously an assimilation, appropriation and deviation. He is inspired by the Romantic credo as manifest in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads: "the poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being… as a Man," (79). He abides by the postmodernist trend of pastiche and parody and repudiates the solemn note of modernist poetry as apparent in T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Edgar Allan Poe etc. He is aware of the crises in modern civilization, yet he preferred to write in a playful tone and seldom lost the joy involved in the process of composing. Ashbery says in the opening poem in the volume entitled, Houseboat Days that he wants to stay away from all sorts of opposition: "to praise this, blame that." However, he is not oblivious of the onus of the poet to reveal the contemporary social scenario. Instead of directly vituperating his condemnation against the degenerated politico-moral society he mockingly calls the politicians and diplomats as the "harbingers of gloom" in 'Decoy'. Ashbery has critiqued all propagandist ideologies as sheer language manipulations. Ashbery has critiqued all propagandist ideologies as sheer language manipulations. Keith Cohen has argued that Ashbery's work not only exemplifies a "disavowal of any political aim...beyond good an evil" as found in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," but also undermines the capitalist discourse of "continuity, utility and closure," (Lehman 1980 26). As most of the other self-reflexive writers, Ashbery also refuses to explain reality or rather

refuses "to pretend any longer that reality is equivalent to truth...coherent and national," (Elliott 1156). Ashbery is conscious of the inability of language to articulate fixed meaning in contrast to the deliberateness that is manifest in the works of T.S. Eliot who gives the theory of 'Objective Correlative'. Eliot is convinced that "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" can be the 'formula' of 'a particular emotion'. However, Ashbery discards this referential equation of language or power of language to express reality. Reality is relative and subjective because contemporary writers do not distinguish between "the self that experiences and the self that writes," (Elliott 1012). Language is a symbolic order that structures both self and the world. He delves into the remote areas of consciousness and for him the external facts need not terminate into internal experiences or sensory emotions. His works are subject to multiple readings and are resistant to a single interpretation. He questions the various linguistic codes through which we define ourselves and the world. He broods over the familiar themes of the relationship between art and life, the instability of the notion of 'Self', nuances of language, the passage of time. Some of his poems can be read as a moment's epiphanic vision or a slide show of a particular phase of life. His compositions unravel the boundaries between poetry and prose. The theoretical shift around 1960 was based on a revision canon that disestablished the formulations of T.S. Eliot and the New Critics. Since then no single poet or a group of poets has dominated the American poetic field. "Authority in American poetry has been dispersed, permitting a plurality of theories and styles," (Elliott 1084). Charles Olson thinks that the "poetic self" is a "participant in the larger force" to enter into a "world of thought and feeling in which we may participate but not dominate ..." (Elliott 1092). Ashbery does not entirely depend on the world of discourse because he believes that language is an artificial construct. A sense of playfulness is imbibed in his language as well as vision since nothing is absolute. Most of his poems resist any definite analysis and signs out aphoristically or rather inconclusively with incomprehensible gestures.

Language as a medium of expression has been interpreted variously by the different schools of literary criticism. New critics differentiate between literary and communicative language. I.A. Richards has drawn a distinction between "emotive" and "scientific" language. The deconstructionist view of language is derived from Saussure's distinction between "langue" and "parole," the language system and its individual manifestation. The New critics have emphasized on the text as an artifact and both the conceptions of "intentional fallacy" and "affective fallacy" does not establish any relationship between the author and the reader. The text assumes its own identity apart from the author-reader nexus. The Phenomenological critics such as Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman asserted in the early 1970s that the author's consciousness is central to apprehending the meaning of a text. It is the readers' responsibility to realize experience, extend and complete the visionary consciousness of the writer. The deconstructionists have put an exclusive emphasis on the responses of the readers. It has two basic tenets. Firstly, it takes the text as a product and the reader its consumer. The meaning of the text depends

on how the reader masters the codes and conventions of linguistic and literary systems. Secondly, the critics like Stanley Fish, Norman Holland and David Bleich extends the concept of "writerly text" which was initiated by Roland Barthes. Here the text is taken as an ongoing process or performance, subject to multiple writings where the reader participates in producing synchronous meanings. Thus reading a poem also entails its re-writing. This process views all texts as inter-texts whose meaning can be apprehended in terms of other texts. The New Historicists have asserted that the reader is constituted by the historical, cultural and the ideological conditions of his/her times. They try to locate the inter-relatedness between the socio-historic contexts to understand a text. The meaning of the same text may vary in historic moments. It is important to follow how each historic moment looks at its past in terms of its existing social and ideological positions. Thus, a text's meaning is mutable and multiple based on the changing historical imperatives and socio-cultural perspectives. For the New Historicists the text has to be inevitably positioned in the contemporary ideological ambience to understand its significance. Ashbery has a knack to engage in new ways the creative minds of the past by adopting the aesthetics of appropriation and revisionary ratio. Postmodernism is not an entire subversion or deviation from modernism but also its continuation. It has "provided the conditions necessary for exploring and recuperating traditions," (Natoli 464) revising and renewing it. Ashbery has adhered to the postmodernist practice of viewing subject as contradictory and multilayered," (Natoli 467). Postmodernism has certain fault-lines in praxis and in this paper I have tried to locate the position of Ashbery as a postmodern poet who is evolved out of Romantic

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Towards a Postmodern Poetics: Reading Elizabeth Bishop's Reccy of Realities

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I have tried to analyze a few poems by Elizabeth Bishop to show how she takes up or takes in shifting identities and subject-positions in a clear dialogue with cultural norms and expectations. I have also sought to chart her poetic trajectory from alienation to alterity to show how she started by refusing to accept the 'otherness' about her and her various poetic personae based on such determinants as gender, sexuality, class or age, and ultimately accepted those self-same counts of 'otherness' in a neverending melee with the 'so-called' metareality of conundrum and contingency that is provisionally called 'life'.

[Key words: Elizabeth Bishop, Postmodernism, Poetics, American, Literature.**]**

The charm and challenge of studying the role of postmodernism in American and culture, at once, consist in and issue from a plethora of perspectives on a 'definitive' meaning of postmodernism. If Postmodernism has been seen and shown to be little more than a mere 'moment', a 'condition' or a 'style', then it has also been elevated to the prominence and durability of a historical 'period'. In this connection, Linda Hutcheon asseverates:

There is certainly no shortage of differing opinions and competing models of postmodernism, but the critics are not the only ones to blame for the sometimes confusing number of explanations and descriptions […] Although the word existed before, it first gained wide acceptance (and its current meaning) in the field of architecture in the 1970s [….] It was not long before the term 'postmodern' spread to other art forms that also demonstrated a paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites […] (Hutcheon: 2006, 115).

To contextualize Hutcheon's statement, these differences result as much from differing critical perspectives as from 'the multiplicity and complexity of the cultural phenomena gathered together under this heading' (Hutcheon: 2006, 115).

Setting aside the daunting postmodernese, so vehemently opposed now-a-days, we may safely postulate postmodernism as a trident of approaches: I) reaction, II) liberation, and III) diffusion. First and foremost, it can be called a reaction against the grands recits of modernity, namely, the megamyths or metanarratives of progress, truth, meaning, knowledge, and nationalism, to name a few. Secondly, it is a liberation from the dogmas of authority – the authority of the self, of the text, and of the narrative. Thirdly, it can also become a dissipation or diffusion of certainties, whereby reality, self, and narrative –

all get dislocated and dispersed into an endless stream of differance, simulacra, and simulations.

Much of the 'postmodern' depends on the maintenance of a 'sceptical attitude'. According to Jean-François Lyotard postmodernism is 'incredulity towards metanarratives' that celebrates 'difference and understandings located within particular local knowledge regimes' (Lyotard: 1984, xxiv). There is, he argues, no single 'Truth' but countless 'little narratives' or petites histoires which demand our understanding and allegiance. This conceptual fluidity transforms entelechies like 'universality', 'reason' and 'truth' into constructs of language valid only within the language-games of its formation and operants. As Chris Barker puts it, 'Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment philosophy of universal reason and progress, and understands truth as a construction of language' (Barker: 2004, 158). It argues that knowledge is not 'metaphysical', 'transcendental' or 'universal' but is 'perspectival in character and there can be no one totalizing knowledge that is able to grasp the "objective" character of the world' (Barker: 2004, 158). 'Knowledge', for Barker and the ilk, is 'specific to particular times, spaces and language-games' — 'not a question of discovering that which already exists', but constructing or accommodating 'interpretations about the world that are taken to be true' (Barker: 2004, 158). This vast plurality and the consequent blurring of divisions make the postmodern critic discard the concept of a single anchoring centre.

Since, an autopsy of postmodernism is beyond the scope of the present study, we should first set the theoretical radar to zero in on those aspects of postmodernism that affected Elizabeth Bishop the person and activated Elizabeth Bishop the poet. Postmodernism has inherited as its asset and liability – a world beset with nuclear threat and an ever present terror alert – a reality, mediated by media-interests and stateideologies – a language bereft of any definitive meaning – and humanity torn between either the acceptance and assimilation provided by the 'norm' or the alienation and alterity resulting from 'deviance'.

How and why should Elizabeth Bishop deserve a study in this context, when she has been variously dismissed as 'an exquisite miniaturist', 'a private poet of descriptive details', and a poet of 'mildly feminist sensibility', must presuppose a glance at her life and career as a poet. Born in 1911 and poetically active from 1946 till her death in 1979, Bishop certainly belonged with all the so-called post-caps such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, to name a few. Brought up by her grandparents after the untimely death of her father when she was only eight months old, and the consequent lifelong mental derangement of her mother, Elizabeth Bishop grew up negotiating her 'difference' against the prying questions of other children from 'functional' households. Later on also, she had to negotiate her sexual difference as a lesbian – the 'other' to the so-called heterosexual 'self'. Rootless in a specific soil and wandering through countries and continents, Bishop wrote about feminine experiences and thorny issues like colonization, male chauvinism, and chromatism, etc. and yet she was always careful to avoid categorization or extreme involvement. Thus she appears to us as a

'quintessentially' postmodern poet (if such essentialization may go with postmodernism) whose relatively slight and manageable poetic oeuvre has received extraordinary critical attention both in her lifetime and after her death.

Bishop's encounters with the post-Second World War scene in both her native US and on her many travels abroad gave to her a sense of isolation and indeterminacy, and a characteristically postmodern sensibility that could, at once, accommodate and embrace diversity and fluidity. A disturbed childhood, an ab-normal sexual orientation (lesbianism), and a lifelong nomadic disposition reinforced her playful acceptance of surfaces, utter distrust of the objective or scientific truth, and studied resistance to the socio-cultural norms that try to legitimate power and exploitation in the name of order, and often become the last fortress of white male privilege.

These facets of her doxa became instrumental in formulating a poetic stance that brought her close to,

- radical feminism in highlighting the inbuilt politico-linguistic gender inequalities, and in putting forward an 'alternative imaginary' over the 'hegemonic imaginary',
- postcolonialism in trying to lay bare the transactions of the colonized subjectivity with the colonizer's ideology, and in creating an agency for the dispossessed and the underprivileged, and
- post-structuralism in denying any fixed meaning, and in affirming the mediation of reality through linguistic representation.

Postmodernism that is at bottom the system(s) of argument to read and/or theorize Postmodernity has points of intersection with the above-mentioned theories thanks to its ever decentralizing and proliferent aspects. The condition of postmodernity that formed and framed Bishop's weltanschauung became the 'implicit principle' that in the words of Earl Miner, formulates the poetics of a writer (Miner in Preminger: 1993, 929). Needless to say, Bishop's claims to the appellation of a postmodern poet rest as much on her postmodern sensibility as on the amenability of her poems to the typically postmodern critical pluralism in being accommodative of their divergent insights and requirements.

Much of Bishop's work seeks to defamiliarize the ordinary events and experiences of a postmodern world. Commonplace objects and occurrences often produce unusual symbolic meanings for her and the need for self-exploration and selfdefinition assume the form of meditations on these external objects. This tendency of the poet is clearly expressed by James McCorkle, 'The extreme process of self-definition, for Bishop, is the provisional and momentary act of writing and self-revelation' (McCorkle: 1987, 93). Thus, a Bishop poem becomes less of an empirical enquiry and more of an interiorized debate. Their multiple voices, rather than being separate characterizations, become projections of a compound self — a self that continually interrogates itself and reveals in the process inherent contradictions and complexities.

This idea of the essential fragmentedness of the world and of human experience leads Bishop to her typically postmodern perspective by breaking down the modernist binaries of stasis and process. By

quoting the wise words of Coleridge, Bishop clarifies her poetic credo that opposed to the tiresome practice of conveying the most 'trivial' thoughts in the most 'fantastic' language, she promotes the expression of the most 'fantastic' thoughts in the most 'correct' and 'natural' language and tries to look through the openness of politics, history and the self, exposing the falsity of their divisions and coherence (Bishop: 2006, 134). Her poetry thus highlights not only the fluidity and nonconformity of a typical postmodernist but also what lies beneath and beyond Giving up the desire to correlate and thereby to maintain a balance between the opposites, Bishop exhibits a unique postmodern poetic characteristic whereby the poet and his/her perceptions stand far away from the social and/or natural constructs as also, transcend them in order to create possibilities of an alternative order.

In this paper, I have tried to analyze a few poems by Elizabeth Bishop to show how she takes up or takes in shifting identities and subject-positions in a clear dialogue with cultural norms and expectations. I have also sought to chart her poetic trajectory from alienation to alterity to show how she started by refusing to accept the 'otherness' about her and her various poetic personae based on such determinants as gender, sexuality, class or age, and ultimately accepted those self-same counts of 'otherness' in a never-ending melee with the 'so-called' metareality of conundrum and contingency that is provisionally called 'life'.

How even ordinary natural phenomena can yield deep insights if only they are minutely observed comes to the fore in a poem like 'Roosters'. To Daniel Hoffman, in this poem 'the reality of the roosters is emblematic, external to the observer whose imagination plays so sportively over barnyard and Gallic steeple with metaphors and associations based on fidelity to the actual and on religious imagery lightly invoked' (Hoffman in Hoffman: 2004, 478). In fact, Bishop analyzes the cock's crow in the 'gunmetal dawn' from a woman's perspective and soon it gets metamorphosed into the shrill cry of patriarchy charging the fair sex to obey and conform. David Perkins, in this context, has opined, "In 'Roosters' […] she [Bishop] bristles at male assertion and perhaps even more at feminine admiration" (Perkins: 2006, 375). This 'feminine admiration' however has to be situated within the preferential scope allowed to the female.

'Roosters' begins with a temporal adverbial 'At four o'clock'. The wee hours of the morning form and frame the context of the cock's crow as well as that of the response it evokes. The first cock's crow initiates a series of echoes till it spreads like 'wild fire' through out the town. Their cries are symbolic of authority, violation and violence:

At four o'clock
in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock (CP. 35)

What irritates the poet-speaker the most is the horrible insistence of the cries that
bruises the pre-morning sleep of both the hen-wives and the woman persona:

where in the blue blur
their rustling wives admire,
the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare. (CP. 35)
And again,
"each one an active
displacement in perspective;
each screaming, "This is where I live!"
Each screaming
"Get up! Stop dreaming!"
Roosters, what are you projecting? (CP. 36)

The traditional cries of the Roosters are sustained both by the admiration of the 'rusting wives' and by their own 'cruel' and 'stupid' 'glare'. According to Betsy Erkkila:

Insisting on the relationship between the cocks who 'command and terrorize' women in the private sphere and the 'senseless order' of war, militarism and violence in the public sphere, 'Roosters' is also a kind of veiled 'coming out' poem in which Bishop registers her personal protest against the 'senseless order' of marriage and heterosexuality that 'floats / all over town' and 'gloats' over the bed of lesbian love" (Erkkila: 1996, 295).

That the cries are 'orders' for the 'wives' who 'lead hens' lives' to be 'courted' or 'despised' at will, gives the speaker the added incentive to break out of the male/female binary that heterosexuality always implies and imposes. So, she adopts the two-fold strategy of debunking such 'wives' and interrogating the roosters' right to command them:

what right have you to give
commands and tell us how to live,
cry "Here!" and "Here!"
and wake us here where are
unwanted love, conceit and war? (CP. 36)

That by the expression 'unwanted love' the speaker hints at a lesbian relationship becomes clear from the negative modifier 'unwanted'; for this love is surely associated with the hen wives (female) and judged by the roosters (male). That Bishop finds the fulfilment of femininity in the adoption of lesbianism points up her strategic displacement of the hierarchy of heterosexuality, first by the anarchy of women's refusal to obey, and then by the equiarchy of female bonding.

That 'love' is 'unwanted' and that 'conceit' and 'war' reign 'here' imparts to the poem a note of profound sadness. Male posturing which is equated with militarism makes 'Roosters' not so much an anti-war poem (the poem was written in 1941) as a thorough enquiry into the impulses towards brutality, domination and imperial that precipitated the World War II (and any war for that matter). The 'virile

presence' of the roosters is variously indicative of sexual prowess and 'combative' mentality. By extension, the virility of patriarchy leads the war-mongers to use the pretext of defending wife and home to bring the world to the verge of destruction:

The crown of red
set on your little head
is charged with all your fighting blood.
Yes, that excrescence
makes a most virile presence,
plus all that vulgar beauty of iridescence. (CP. 37)

It is in this context that Jeffrey Powers-Beck has highlighted how Elizabeth Bishop '[…] mocks the aggressors [who happen to be male] in images of roosters' (Powers-Beck: 1995, 82). Powers-Beck further points out how in this poem Bishop has critiqued 'the cocks' proprietary and insistent crowing, their ostentatious and bloody fighting, their control and sacrifice of "hens' lives", their stupid conceit and will to power, and their utter indifference toward their victims [including themselves as well]' (Powers-Beck: 1995, 823).

The poem also describes the denial of responsibility as well as the dissipation of patriarchy by alluding to the biblical story of St. Peter and a natural description of the clear morning beyond the 'traditional cries' of the roosters. According to Jonathan Ellis, 'Roosters' is perhaps her [Bishop's] most religious poem with its allusions to scripture and final plea for forgiveness' (Ellis: 2010, 16-17). Howbeit, neither the 'religious' nature of the poem nor the 'plea for forgiveness' can be accepted without reservations. St. Peter, the archetypal Christian patriarch, committed a sin of the 'spirit' by thrice denying Christ, the Saviour, and even then got His 'forgiveness' as well as his own religious rehabilitation (deification). In contrast, Mary Magdalene's sin of the 'flesh' (prostitution) though it got Christ's forgiveness provoked unrelenting strictures from the church. This differential treatment meted out to the patriarch and the prostitute surely points at the hypocrisy of a male-dominated religious establishment.

Besides, such divergent reactions of 'Saviour' and 'Church' to the same 'sin' of a woman indicate a clear double standard in practice. That the roosters could at once symbolize St. Peter's conviction and deification foregrounds patriarchy's right and might in controlling culture. But at the fag end of the poem the female-speaker has the last laugh as the roosters representing patriarchy become 'almost inaudible' (CP. 39), a spent force, clearing up thereby the possibility of a peaceful existence for 'hens' and 'women', the so-called gender equals beyond the barrier of species. The final message of the poem, therefore, foregrounds an 'alternative imaginary' of (female) coexistence over the 'hegemonic imaginary' of (male) domination and destruction.

If 'Roosters' presents an oblique comment on 'male militarism' and 'imperial ambition' of and from the 20th century, then 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' gives us a classic case of militarism and colonization from

the 16th century. The prolonged stay in Brazil left a profound mark on Bishop's poetic sensibility. Already with the postmodern times and the postcolonial reality, she could easily identify with the spirit of the land, thanks to the colonial past that the United States shared with Brazil. Bishop focuses in her Brazil poems on a densely textured intersection of race, class and gender ideologies and foregrounds the politics of colonialism and colonial conquest of the New World. In fact, as Robert Boschman has shown us, '"Brazil January 1, 1502" implies a loss of the sense of current, civilized time as the speaker takes an imaginative excursion over four centuries into the past to envision the first Portuguese conquistadors' encounter with the Amazon rainforest and its native inhabitants' (Boschman: 2009, 74).

In 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', the poet gives a full expression to a multi-layered dispersal of perceptions and perspectives that her postmodern sensibility brought into the description of a postcolonial scene. That postcolonial in this context refers to the time of intersection between the colonial discourse and the colonized subjectivity comes to the fore in Bishop's choice of the title. In fact, 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' is at once a physical and discoursal space caught in the temporal stasis of a date as also in the spatial confines of a country: '… embroidered nature … tapestried landscape' (CP 91). Bishop's reference to 'Januaries' merges the time of the European colonization in the sixteen century with that of the American tourist's observation in the twentieth century. But, though Nature might have revealed herself to both the conquistadors and the poetic persona in the exactly similar manner, their perceptions, thanks to their different perspectives (if we are prepared to overlook changes wrought by time), must have been different.

Bishop's 'visual poetics' which Bonnie Costello has called attention to (Costello: 1991) in its proliferent elasticity now disperses the act of sight into the wide spectrum of subject-positions from Nature to the conquistadors to the colonized. At a later stage, however, the poetic surface transfers itself from the poet to the readers by way of a 'postmodern diffusion' of the narrative:

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
every square inch filling in with foliage—
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges, (CP. 91)

Lionel Kelly opines, 'To put January in the plural immediately posits multiplicity; and we know "Nature" cannot "greet" anyone, unless they are anthropomorphizing their environment' (Kelly: 61). It is quite plausible that both the Portuguese conquistadors and the visiting poet 'anthropomorphized' their 'environment'. However, their motives for such anthropomorphization must have been different; for while the conquistadors wanted a pretext for plunder, Bishop needed a context for her critique thereof. The European colonizers came to Brazil with the purpose of pillage and brought with them the

assumptions of their socio-religio-literary culture. So, they tried to assess and judge the landscape on the basis of their preconceptions. The jungle of the real Brazil did not tally with the bower they had envisioned. But it was for this very reason that they forced the real to fit the ideal, trying to read the old world into the new. As the pillage of the colony coincided with the rape of the indigenous women, the project acquired obvious sexual implications. What prompts the poet to associate herself in this game of vision is that 'her own possession of Brazil', as Helen Vendler points out, 'she [Bishop] suspects, has something in it not unlike the plunder and rape of the conquistadors, who came "hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting / in creaking armour" to the New World, a tapestry of vegetative and human attraction' (Vendler: 1987, 832). Bishop gives a free reign to her poetic imagination in re-creating the scene of colonization:

Directly after the Mass, humming perhaps
L'Homme arme or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself—
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (CP. 92)

The references to the 'Mass' and the 'Hymn' connect the politico-economic project of colonization to the religious project of Christian evangelism. As a result, the surveyed scene of tropical opulence gets superimposed with a post-lapserian Eden where nature becomes indicative of the original sin rather than with any creative vitality. Ideological naïveté allows the conquistadors to gloss over their own lasciviousness under the guise of bringing Christian salvation to those 'maddening little women.

The conquistadors equate these 'maddening little women' to birds and lizards; for the exotic and erotic charms of those women 'madden' them. That 'maddening' as a signifier is a product of the conquistador's gaze and not that of the 'women's' design may problematize the male privilege of inspection and judgement. 'Here Bishop's poetry', as Angus Cleghorn has suggested, enacts 'animification as opposed to personification' and in doing so she reveals 'her awareness that colonialism past and present prevent those visiting Brazil from ever capturing the native place' (Cleghorn: 2004, 23).

As per the postcolonial discourse, the chased women create a community that seeks to resist the colonizing project of homogenization. The strategy they adopt is twofold. First and foremost, they subtract themselves from the colonial discourse by stepping out of the picture (tapestry) and going behind it. Secondly, they shatter the at once auditory and ideological silence of the colonizer's discourse by waking up the big symbolic birds (the colonized communities) to unite and fight back this ideological domination. The perception of the Europeans was formed and framed by what their individual and group interests. So, the work of art (tapestry) that they made was sure to reflect this partial view. This sequence

of causality may lead us to the slippery path of reality, representation, and knowledge. Since, all reality is representational in nature, and all representation makes knowledge ideological and then therefore provisional, connects this poem to the postmodern metareality of conundrum and contingency.

If 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' presents a poet's revisions of the project and process of colonization, 'Crusoe in England' presents a colonizer's revisions of both the project and the process from the perspective of lived experience. Bishop begins a game of linguistic destabilization with her choice of the title; for 'Crusoe', who is always already associated in the readers' mind with his uninhabited tropical island is strategically displaced to England, the citadel of 'civilization' and 'society'. In this connection Kit Fan has reminded us, 'Crusoe comes back to England but is still tied to the umbilical cord of his island' (Fan: 2005, 45). In fact, Bishop's Crusoe is fated to go on negotiating the chain of meeting and loss that his 'arrival at', 'stay in' and 'rescue from' the uninhabited island brought him. In fact, he has found his island, lived there and left it for 'other islands'. Similarly, he had lost his shipmates, found Friday and lost him. But, the surface certainties of this referentiality get dispersed across the poem's narrative structure.

Bishop exhibits an extraordinary penchant for indeterminacy by partly revealing and partly concealing a post-structural interpretative possibility. According to Robert Boschman,

While Crusoe [Defoe's hero] sees its narrator splitting his perspective between England, which represents the domesticated past, and the wild, unnamed island where he has been shipwrecked alone, Bishop's speaker emphasizes [...] how his island eventually became home even as England gradually became an alien place. After his long solitude, Bishop's Crusoe now finds himself dislocated in England 'another island, / that doesn't seem, but who decides?' (Boschman: 2009, 152).

Thus, the poem collates the subject-positions of the speaker from the opposite poles of exile and domicile. At the same time Bishop defamiliarizes the ordinary experiences that get continually deferred in the process of signification. In Fan's words, '"Crusoe in England" returns to the chasm between text and experiences—and to dislocation' (Fan: 2005, 45). Thus, the immediate gets mediated by the modes of knowledge and reportage that we superimpose upon it through our preconception and representation.

'Crusoe in England' opens by describing Crusoe's account of the discovery of an island as reported in the newspaper. According to the report, the birth of this island was seen by some passing ship. Thus, the mariners/passengers of the passing ship, the newspaper reporter, Crusoe as reader, and Bishop as poet — all stand the chance and run the risk of distorting as well as reconstructing a natural process through their divergent subject positions as revealed through their reception and reportage:

at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—
rose in the mate's binoculars
and caught on the horizon like a fly. (CP. 192)

The representational nature of this reality (i.e. the birth of the island) problematizes any notion of

knowledge as is suggested in the last line of the first stanza: 'None of the books has ever got it right' (CP 192). No mode of knowledge, Bishop implies here, has ever got it 'right' or can ever get 'it' right. This points up the fact that a direct first-hand impression or experience of nature is inaccessible to us; for reality is always mediated through the supplemental aid of 'papers' or 'binoculars', and we should therefore make the necessary allowance for all the delay and deferment that the repetition inherent in such representation demands.

As the island was created by volcanic eruption, Bishop's Crusoe shifts his attention to volcanoes. Michael Ryan shows us how 'descriptive language', here, assumes a 'reductive' austerity ('miserable, small volcanoes', 'a few slithery strides', 'volcanoes dead as ash heaps'). Since knowledge remains grounded in a perspective that is itself in contact with and in the grip of the word, 'knowledge without binoculars' brings a mere literal sense of objects that operates at variance with the accounts to be found in books, substitute descriptions in language that can never 'get it right' (Ryan: 1999, 92). Bishop is aware of and fascinated by the fact that perspectival alteration may, and often does, alter reality and its perception. She as a result cannot be impervious to the implication that our ethical concerns about the right and the wrong are contingent initially on perception and eventually on perspective:

I'd think that if they were the size
I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
become a giant;
and if I had become a giant,
I couldn't bear to think what size the goats and turtles were. (CP 193)

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Life on this island is characterized by its quiet bliss as well as its irksome sameness and a lack of human company. Crusoe's loneliness is alleviated temporarily, just as it is in Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, by the arrival of Friday:

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
another minute longer, Friday came. (CP 194)

That 'Accounts of that have everything all wrong' testifies to the pseudo-factual nature of representation. The identity of Friday is imbricated by being the embodiment of the colonizer's 'will' for human subjects and on account of a veiled reference to a mutual desire between Crusoe and Friday:

Friday was nice
Friday was nice, and we were friends. (CP 194)

The same vein of appreciation is continued in Crusoe's assertion, 'Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body' (CP 194). The hint of a heterosexual narrative thwarting the reality and/or desirability of their relation, 'If only he had been a woman' gets brushed aside by the final endearment, 'Friday, my dear Friday' (CP 196) as also by the sense of loss that the death of Friday entails for Crusoe, the provisional speaker of the poem. 'Bishop's poem', as Victoria Harrison points out, 'downplays the hierarchy Defoe establishes between the two men' (Harrison: 1993, 191). As Harrison further states, 'Although Crusoe speaks for Friday, he does so less as colonizer than as surviving, mourning friend' (Harrison: 1993, 191).

Crusoe and Friday share a happy life together. But, their Utopian life in the island is cut short as they are rescued/miscued:

And then one day they came and took us off.
Now I live here, another island,
that doesn't seem like one, but who decides? (CP 195)

This curt statement blots out the givens of an authentic existence. The weighted present gets swamped by the temporal vortex of a contingent continuum as Bishop allows both deletion and articulation to stand and mean. The subsidence of a whole saga into a single sentence is signalled as Crusoe resets the historical, chronological frame discarding established formal considerations. The intrusive 'And' that abruptly ushers in the event at once telescopes and superposes narrative elements into staging devices. In this context, C.K. Doreski comments "Only in retrospect does it become clear that them and us, then and now form the lyric hinges of the poem, the rhetorical elements that defer narrative in favour of lyric or meditative strategies" (Doreski: 1993, 161).

Bringing to the surface the 'textual subconscious' the desperate groping of 'but who decides?' destabilizes referentiality of experience on the one hand, and knowledge on the other; for decision needs determinacy and determinacy is found to disappear in the quicksand of discourse. The isolation on a physical island has been replaced by a random, careless existential interior remove. The erstwhile governor of an unsettled island, Crusoe is now caught between and bored by the real and uninteresting of this 'other island', made so because of the post-mortem realities. So, he can bring himself to offer but a visual approbation to those treasured relics of a life left behind. Reticent to handle his memorabilia, he whispers, 'My eyes rest on it and pass on' (Cp197), because the knife that had once 'reeked of meaning like a crucifix' has no 'life' utility for him anymore. In fact, the 'meaning' of those things has expired in course of the ceaseless march of time making them mere 'uninteresting lumber' (CP 197). In fact, it seems 'uninteresting' only to the self-interested 'I'.

If we subject the poem to an intensive post-structuralist scrutiny, disunity is revealed on 'the verbal', 'the textual', and 'the linguistic' levels. On the verbal plain, the 'glittering rollers' and the 'overcast sky' construct a visual paradox that on the literal level seems utterly incompatible with each other. Since an 'overcast sky' causes rapid deterioration of sunlight, the 'glitter' of the rollers seems optically untenable.

But having to live in an uninhabited island, Crusoe develops a different kind of vision that can easily attribute an imaginary 'glitter' to the free and moving waves. On the textual level, we come across various shifts and breaks in the poem that can be said to constitute its fault-lines. Through out the poem the focus keeps shifting from the birth of the new island to Crusoe's life in the uninhabited island, to Friday's arrival, to their rescue from the island, and ultimately to Crusoe's afterlife in England. Boschman opines that Bishop's Crusoe is 'a solitary observer who meditates for twenty-eight years on the sea and landscapes of the island where he had formerly been shipwrecked' (Boschman: 2009, 152).

In 'Crusoe in England', time shifts both backward and forward, enlisting the techniques of 'flash back' as well as 'psychic projection'. Though all the events described are recounted by Crusoe, the birth of the new island that sets the narrative ball rolling takes place years after Crusoe's removal from the island. The past that is at once revisited and reconstructed through memory and representation sometimes comes up to the plain of the present as well. Shifts in tone are also to be perceived whereby the speaker starts by describing the discovery of a new island as reported in the newspapers in a satirical vein, light-heartedly talks about 'fifty two / miserable, small volcanoes', fondly remembers the relief that the arrival of Friday had given him, mulls over their rescue from the island with a feeling of nostalgia and ends by lamenting the same 'rescue' on account of his 'uninteresting' contemporaneity.

On the linguistic plain, we come across a few moments in the poem when the adequacy of language as a viable medium of communication is itself called into question. The discovery by some ship of 'an island being born' and the fact that 'they named it' can be cited as two representative cases in point. The birth of the island is seen by some passing ship, through the 'mate's binoculars' and reported in the newspapers. The whole process is thereby distanced and provisionalized through sight and reportage holding reality to ransom by representation. The blanks in the poem might have resulted from the kind of books that Crusoe had read in the island:

Because I didn't know enough.
Why didn't I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I'd read were full of blanks;
the poems—well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds, (CP. 193)

In another instance, the textual world of the poem quite like the textual world of the island reverberates with the 'questioning shrieks' of the gulls and the 'equivocal replies' of the goats:

The island smelled of goat and guano.
The goats were white, so were the gulls,
and both too tame, or else they thought
I was a goat, too, or a gull.

Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek,
baa ... shriek ... baa ... (CP. 193)

Here the premodifiers 'questioning' and 'equivocal' at once qualify and render as indeterminate both the shrieks and the replies respectively; for if the questioning shrieks issue from ignorance or uncertainty in the questioner's mind then the equivocal replies too foregrounds the unwillingness or the inability of the answerer to proffer definite information or analysis. Crusoe's playing with the names of the volcanoes can be associated with the post-structuralists' irreverent attitude to language: One billy-goat would stand on the volcano I'd christened Mont d'Espoir or Mount Despair (I'd time enough to play with names), and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air. (CP 193) As a matter of fact, to name is to define, and to define is to mean, whereas to 'play with names' is to destabilize the signifier/signified correspondence and in short the whole process of signification.

In the journey towards a postmodern poetics the poem 'At the Fishhouses' may provide us with a brilliant case study to analyze Bishop's negotiations with the characteristically postmodern themes, tendencies, and attitudes. In the words of Peggy Anne Samuels, "In 'At the Fishhouses' there is a greater emphasis on surfaces that peel off and attach themselves to other bodies; nets that begin to undulate, transforming into deeper surfaces; and there is the bringing together of unlike elements in a kind of 'lucky strike'" (Samuels: 2010, 126). Needless to say, these layers of detachable 'surfaces' and their ability/propensity to form myriad contingent bondings of significations foreground the questing poet's 'greater' awareness of the 'undulating' postmodern terrain of spatiotemporal flux and linguistic free fall.

The title 'At the Fishhouses' pins us down to a place of stasis where 'fishes' that represent 'meaning' are absent and we are left with the mere traces like 'smell' ('the air smells so strong of codfish') and 'scales'('The big fish tubs are completely lined / with layers of beautiful herring scales'). As exemplified by the stative verbs of the poem's opening section ('have', 'is', 'are', 'is', etc.), the described scene seems eternally suspended:

The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
*** *** ***
Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted. (CP. 74)

On a deeper level, however, Bishop's description implies that the scene is a product of continual changes wrought both by man and by nature. The man's shuttle is 'worn and polished', the ironwork on the capstan 'has rusted', the buildings have 'an emerald moss / growing on their shoreward walls' and the wheelbarrows are 'plastered' with 'creamy iridescent coats of mail'. 'Such details', according to Lynn Keller, 'make us aware that a future visitor would find a different scene in which these processes of erosion, decay, and growth were further advanced' (Keller: 1987, 124).

The poet goes on to populate the scene with 'iridescent flies' and 'an old man'. The flies as well as the man wait in a characteristically postmodern posture for a 'herring boat'. The 'prospect' and/or the 'image' of the 'herring boat' (yet 'to come in') constitutes for both a glittering amalgam of 'memory' and 'desire' that we can term a kind of 'hyperreality' or 'simulacrum'. Significantly, the old man 'sits netting / his net' (to perpetuate his profession), and 'waits for a herring boat to come in' (in which he cannot go fishing anymore). These bits of information coupled with the retroversion, 'He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish' (he no longer does so), skilfully contrast the past and the present of the old man:

an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished. (CP 74)

Evidently, the man has lost much of his strength and power with age, as is indicated by his 'black old knife / the blade of which is almost worn away'. The knife is a phallic symbol, the wear and tear of which signifies the dissipation of patriarchal vigour, presenting an alternative model of asexual egalitarianism in lieu of the hegemonic model of sexist paternalism. His remembered act of scraping the 'scales' from 'the unnumbered fish' may stand for the language game of separating the 'trace' (scales) and the 'meaning' (fish), and contextualize his present 'decline'. The 'heavy surface' of the sea and the old man wait alike. Because of its eagerness, the sea is described as 'considering spilling over' but never does. The old man in his part has been and ceased to be a seafarer waiting instead for the herring boat that is yet to come. By way of a postmodernist intervention, Bishop at this juncture infiltrates the 'scene' with herself as an active participant to undercut its ahistorical fixity. She at once gives the old man a 'Lucky Strike' and begins a conversation with him. By embedding more overt reminders of historical processes, she states 'He was a friend of my grandfather' (implying thereby the grandfather's death) and alludes to 'the decline in the population' (alluding therein to broader sociological changes). In this way, as Umberto Eco has taught us, the postmodern interlocutors revisit the past with irony (Eco: 1992, 227). This they do by accepting and enjoying the fragmentation of the past rather than lamenting it and engaging in language games to rationalize the said process: The old man accepts a Lucky Strike. He was a friend of my grandfather. We talk of the decline in the population and of codfish and herring boat to

come in while he waits for a herring boat to come in. (CP. 75)

He was a friend of my grandfather', coupled with 'the decline in the population' (emphasis added), frames the context of the conversation whereby the old acquaintance and shared community of the 'grandfather' and the 'old man' and the demographic change in the locality are all brought to the fore but indirectly, avoiding false innocence but expressing the intended opinions all the same. This language game of 'recognition', 'courtesy', and 'concern' imparts social identity to both the old man and the speaker. The kind of legitimating discourse of 'truth'/'reality' that the old man and the speaker seek and logocentrism demands is parodied by the 'opaque' surface of the sea and the yet-toreturn 'herring boat'. Whereas the 'opacity' of the sea surface resists the efforts of the observer/speaker to know, the 'deferred/unoccured arrival' of the herring boat pits absence against presence. This is also a parody of the totalizing metadiscoure of epistemology and need, a practical demonstration of the language game of truth which is all that is available to the postmodern man.

Leaving aside the old man, dangling precariously between 'expectancy' and 'indeterminacy', the speaker now talks about 'one seal particularly':

One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment. (CP 75)

Bishop's attempted identification with the agreeable seal blurs the boundaries between the 'perceiver' and the 'perceived'. She strategically personifies the sea mammal by using exactly the sort of words that are usually applied to a human acquaintance. According to Helen Vendler, the 'total immersion' that Bishop, like the seal, is fond of takes place for her in 'the bitter Atlantic of an icy truth' (Vendler: 1987, 830). The 'mere initiation' to that 'total immersion', however, proves so tough and troublesome that the speaker is forced to concede that it is humanly unattainable:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (CP. 75-6)

In a clear contrast to this, the curious seal is perceived to be at home in the water implying a possibility, even if remote, of one getting used to 'total immersion'. This 'total immersion' however, makes 'the' truth 'a' truth, problematizing its conceptualization as well as its expression, on account of the indeterminacy that is characteristic of the postmodern condition. According to Vendler, 'the seal' is 'Bishop's characteristic "signature" here' since her 'radical isolation and scepticism' are often poetized with/through 'such a moment of self-detachment and self-irony' (Vendler: 1987, 830).

Taking her cue from the scene of contrast between man's inability and the seal's ability to achieve 'total immersion', Bishop puts forward the sea as a symbol of 'what we imagine knowledge to be'. The different tastes of the sea water ('bitter', briny,' and 'burning') as it is likened to the different manifestations of 'knowledge' ('dark', 'salt', 'clear', 'moving', and 'utterly free'), brings us to the postmodern conception of knowledge. The megamyth of 'knowledge' is based on and determined by 'meaning' – 'meaning' that is itself permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meanings and thus volatile and unstable. Knowledge thus provisionalized and made indeterminate comes to be a kind of a metanarrative. So any access to and hold on knowledge becomes at once provisional and tenuous. By suggesting that our pretensions to any kind of knowledge are always already invalidated in adhering to a vision of differance, Bishop betrays her strong poststructuralist/postmodernist leanings. 'Knowledge' for Bishop, as James McCorkle suggests, is 'derived ['drawn'] from concretes, and then therefore, phenomenal' (McCorkle: 1992, 65).

'The cold hard mouth of the world' and 'the rocky breasts' that are the 'outlet' and the 'source' of this knowledge respectively at once feminizes its origin and makes it resistant to easy comprehension. The sea that is the source and the outlet of knowledge is likened to and is itself the primordial grounding of 'form', 'formlessness' and 'life'. Similarly, the phenomenon, which is the constant and erosive flux, becomes a repository of 'mystery' and a nullification of 'mastery'. The knowable object, therefore, foils any bid to objectify or hold it fixed. This fact makes our knowledge 'flowing and flown', 'temporal' and a 'linguistic construct', and then therefore, vulnerable to 'change' and 'decay'. Near the end of the poem the relation between knowledge and the sea is conveyed in and through the repetitive and connective consonance between 'flowing and drawn' and 'flowing and flown'. Thus, as Susan McCabe has remarked, "In usurping and reversing the usual functions of tenor and vehicle, deliquescence becomes the central term and knowledge a way to convey it" (McCabe: 1994, 136). In other words, by accepting the dispersal of knowledge caught in the flux of time and perspective, Bishop constitutes and conceives

of an epistemology wherein 'knowledge' becomes utterly free, diffuse, and an unlimited entity. As a result, 'knowledge' can be paradoxically 'dark' and 'clear' being at once both and none of these.

Bishop's postmodern poetics evolves through a constant dialogue between the 'self' and the 'world'. As per the taxonomy of sight, she tries to see and interpret the scene or the situation from her shifting subject-positions. As a result, we come across the cultural outsider ('Brazil, January 1, 1502') and an active insider aiming at 'total immersion' ('At the Fishhouses'). In her different avatars the observer/speaker tries to I) peep at reality from outside in 'Brazil, January 1, 1502') inspect as well as introspect on 'scene' and 'meaning' through 'total immersion' (involvement) in 'At the Fishhouses'. It is true that her poetry is premised on 'loss' – the loss of 'certitude' and 'social acceptability', but, as Wordsworth would have said 'other gifts / Have followed, for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense' (Wordsworth: 1997, 59). In Bishop's case, these 'gifts' may refer to a gain in perspective and the acceptance of both 'difference' and 'differance'. Rather than avoiding 'alienation', Bishop's poetic personae are perceived as courting it in and through the recognition and acceptance of 'alterity' of the victimized female in the 'Roosters' or of the desperate seeker after 'total immersion' in 'At the Fishhouses'. On another level, it is this recognition of alienation and acceptance alterity that enables the poet to critique and question the imperialist project of homogenization and eraser of the native identity in such poems as 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' and 'Crusoe in England'.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry presents her valiant attempts to accept the endless varieties of the postmodern world that jostle for our understanding and accommodation. Breaking down the binaries between the 'self' and the 'other', the 'then' and the 'now', and the 'introspective' and the 'inspective', Bishop fashions a poetics that is at once postmodern and antinormal. According to Ihab Hassan, 'Her own objectivity in discerning the aspects and relations of things is visual, and so clear as to be dream-like, fantasmic like some imaginary iceberg, "jewellery from a grave" sparring with the sun' (Hassan: 1973, 105). As a matter of fact, in the smithy of the poet's mind, 'scene' gives 'sense'; 'sense' crystallizes into 'sensibility'; and 'sensibility' brings forth a 'textuality' that at once propagates the need for 'harmonious coexistence' and rationalizes disharmony in terms of 'difference', 'injustice', and 'ignorance'.

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